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THE LEBANESE IN MISSISSIPPI: AN ORAL HISTORY DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression

in Southern Studies at

the University of Mississippi

by

JAMES G. THOMAS, JR.

May 2020

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## ABSTRACT

The Lebanese in Mississippi is a curated open-access online project ([www.thelebaneseinmississippi.com](http://www.thelebaneseinmississippi.com)) that provides a narrative of a people, dating from the late nineteenth century to present, using multiple forms of audio (including audio documentaries), video, partial transcripts, a concise history of Lebanese immigration to Mississippi, and both portrait and artifact photography. The project explores the lives of first- and subsequent-generation Lebanese Mississippians whose families immigrated to Mississippi. It is an oral record—sometimes a second-hand “remembering”—of the participants’ forbearers’ experiences of settling in a foreign land where they knew few people, did not speak the language, and had to create their own occupations. This oral history project is the collective story of struggles and successes, of maintaining an ethnic identity while assimilating into a new culture. It is both past and present. Heard together, the oral histories in this project provide a picture of a people remembering where they came from and of the struggles of those who came before them. Their stories begin on a ship leaving harbor in Syria and continue today in towns and cities across Mississippi.

The goal of this project is to both document and present life histories of this immigrant group in Mississippi, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience in the American South. My goal, more specifically, is to present Lebanese immigration and life in Mississippi, from the late nineteenth century to the present, within the context of the group’s interaction with both the state’s broader dominant group (whites) and other non-dominant groups (African Americans and other non-European immigrant groups). The more far-reaching

objective of this project is to provide access to this material to a broad audience so scholars and a general readership alike may interact with these historical narratives while grappling with the documentary evidence through individuals' curated stories. Working in the discipline of digital humanities, this new project benefits from the affordances of online digital technology by providing a wider reach and increased accessibility.

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## I: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

*“Oral historians are haunted by the obituary page. Every death represents the loss of a potential narrator and thus an absolute diminution of society’s collective historical memory.” — from*

*Oral History: From Tape to Type, Cullom Davis, Kathryn Black, and Kay McLean*<sup>1</sup>

“The Lebanese in Mississippi: An Oral History” dates back to the 1970s in Leland, Mississippi, where, as a young boy, I would sit with my many cousins and listen to stories that my Lebanese father and his Lebanese mother and brothers and sisters would often tell about growing up and living in the Mississippi Delta. The food we ate at my grandmother’s dining room table reinforced an understanding of our Lebanese past and our Lebanese Mississippian present. The pots of rolled grape leaves, the raw kibbee spread on a plate with a drizzle of olive oil poured across it, and the sour laban yogurt made fresh from a family-shared starter were all evidence that some traditions from the old country were not fading anytime soon, even if some others, like the use of the Arabic language, were fading from practice.

This project is a curated open-access online project ([www.thelebaneseinmississippi.com](http://www.thelebaneseinmississippi.com)) that provides a narrative of a people, dating from the late nineteenth century to present, using multiple forms of audio (including audio documentaries), video, partial transcripts, a concise history of Lebanese immigration to Mississippi, and both portrait and artifact photography. It

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, six of this project’s narrators have passed away. The project is dedicated to Leo Boolos Jr., Chafik Chamoun, Louis Naaman Jr., Mary Louise Nosser, Louise Abraham Wilson, and my father, James George Thomas Sr. in the hope that their voices and their memories will live on.

exists as a “remembering” of those days, for me and for the project’s participants. For all involved, it is a product of our families’ roots in what was once Syria, now Lebanon. Those roots extend all the way back to the 1880s, when the ancestors of the participants in this study, as well as my own ancestors, began making their often-arduous journey to America, and then to Mississippi, to find a better life for themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup>

This project explores the lives of first- and subsequent-generation Lebanese Mississippians whose families immigrated to Mississippi. In 2007 I completed a Southern Studies master’s thesis that was a long written history, based on and constructed from a wide range of primary and secondary sources. This MFA project differs considerably in that it is an oral record—sometimes a second-hand “remembering”—of the participants’ forbearers’ experiences of settling in a foreign land where they knew few people, did not speak the language, and had to create their own occupations. This oral history project is the collective story of struggles and successes, of maintaining an ethnic identity while assimilating into a new culture. It is both past and present. Heard together, the oral histories in this project provide a picture of a people remembering where they came from and of the struggles of those who came before them. Their stories begin on a ship leaving harbor in Syria and continue today in towns and cities across Mississippi.

The goal of this project is to both document and present life histories of this immigrant group in Mississippi, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience in the American South. My goal, more specifically, is to present Lebanese immigration and life in

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<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology is necessary here: When the Lebanese first came to America in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, “Mount Lebanon,” or Lebanon, was a region in Syria. It did not gain independence until the French Mandate, which was founded after the First World War, ended following the Second World War, creating the independent country of Lebanon. Until then, those first-wave immigrants referred to themselves as Syrians, but after Lebanon gained independence, they began to identify as Lebanese, thus while those early immigrants came from the country of Syria, they later identified as Lebanese and have done so ever since.



Mississippi, from the late nineteenth century to the present, within the context of the group's interaction with both the state's broader dominant group (whites) and other non-dominant groups (African Americans and other non-European immigrant groups). The more far-reaching objective of this project is to provide access to this material to a broad audience so scholars and a general readership alike may interact with these historical narratives while grappling with the documentary evidence through individuals' curated stories. Working in the discipline of digital humanities, this new project benefits from the affordances of online digital technology by providing a wider reach and increased accessibility.

### Scope of Project

When I began this project, some of the general questions I sought answers to included: How does the Lebanese experience in the state connect to local history or events? How did the Lebanese attempt to assimilate into local communities? How did first- and subsequent-generation Lebanese Americans engage in placemaking and cultural formation? What do these stories/experiences tell us about the Lebanese American community and how they see themselves? What do those first-generation and subsequent-generation Lebanese Americans want us to believe—or understand better—about their collective experience?

As this project has progressed, the answers to these questions have distilled into four themes (and topics of audio documentaries): remembering stories handed down from previous generations about why the Lebanese left Syria (“Leaving the Mountain”); how participants’ families found their way to Mississippi and what their lives were like once they got here (“Coming to America, Settling in Mississippi”); living in the Jim Crow South and the subjective

perspective of a marginalized ethnic group (“Living in the Jim Crow South”); and, finally, their attempt to participate in the dominant, white American social group while simultaneously retaining an ethnic identity (“Maintaining an Ethnic Identity”). I elaborate upon these topics later in this paper, although the scope of this collection of oral histories certainly ranges well beyond those categorizations.

This project collects and documents both personal and family histories, gathers memories of growing up in the state as it relates to ethnicity, and investigates how Lebanese people have both consciously and unconsciously acculturated to the state and have participated in forming Mississippi’s history, society, and economy. In it I show how members of this community have performed Lebanese identity as a group, such as participation in the Cedars of Lebanon Club in Greenville and the Lebanese-congregation St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Vicksburg, and I show how they have either continued to maintain or have lost various traditions, such as Lebanese foodways, Arabic language use, social habits, and marriage customs. I show how those practices have changed over time.

Integral to this project is exploring the Lebanese experience in Mississippi—entering the state at the end of the nineteenth century, a period of social upheaval when whites in the state feared losing power to black citizens. As a result, the 1890 Mississippi constitutional convention enacted disfranchisement statutes that imposed a two-dollar poll tax, a literacy test, secret ballot, a two-year residency clause, and an understanding clause. Opportunities for black advancement steadily diminished, leading directly to Jim Crow segregation, racial terror, and widespread black poverty. The Lebanese, along with other non-white immigrant groups, feared similar oppression. For the next six decades, the Lebanese navigated the social customs of the Jim Crow South. This

project illuminates that experience. In this paper, I show how the individual narratives found in the online Lebanese in Mississippi documentary tell the story of that collective experience.

This paper and the documentary online project investigate the Lebanese collective memory, or what sociologist Karida L. Brown has called “communal memory.”<sup>3</sup> Collectively, they remember stories handed down to them by parents and grandparents about struggle in the home country and journeys to new places in search of better lives. They remember their parents socializing with other Lebanese families, the food they cooked with their elders, and the encouragement to Americanize so that they could fit into the cultures they were born into. They remember their own struggles to fit into a white society when neither they themselves nor the broader society considered them white.

A bit of elaboration here might be helpful: In the American South, simply put, identity was wrapped up in race. Syrians had been granted citizenship in the United States since they began arriving in the 1880s,<sup>4</sup> and naturalization papers for Syrian immigrants in Mississippi’s Coahoma and Lauderdale counties between 1910 and 1920 indicate that the Syrians’ race was considered “white,” while their complexion was listed as “dark.” One such Syrian was forty-five-year-old Tanos Farris, from Sareen (Sarine), Syria, who applied for citizenship in 1924. Living in Clarksdale, Farris, a “merchant,” as described on his Declaration of Intention, is a representative example of countless other Syrian immigrants who applied for US citizenship since the turn of the century. Similarly, records from the Fifteenth US Census (1930) and the Sixteenth US Census (1940) indicate that Lebanese families in Greenville and Leland were listed as “white” by the US government. It is interesting to note that in the race-identification section

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, Karida L. *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Amir Marvasti and Karyn D. McKinney, *Middle Eastern Lives in America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 10.

on the recent 2020 US Census survey, the examples for “white” are “German, Irish, English Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.”

Despite their government-assigned race, in the early decades of the twentieth century, at least in various parts of Mississippi, southern custom in the Jim Crow South pushed the Lebanese to segregate into black public spaces. The Lebanese lived in black neighborhoods, where they sold groceries and dry goods to black families. When they ventured beyond the borders of their neighborhoods, they sometimes faced the prejudices experienced by other nonwhite groups. For example, Pam Jabour Mayfield reports that her grandfather, as we’ll see later in this paper, was expected to eat in the black sections of restaurants in Vicksburg.

Yet, as early as the 1930s, Syrian children were able to attend white schools in Mississippi. In the homeland, the Syrian-Lebanese self-identified not by race but by family and religion, which created a confusing and complicated new concept of identity. The result was that older generations of Lebanese often socialized solely with other Lebanese. “My mother,” claimed Gloria Shamoun Thomas, “like when she grew up, they didn’t associate with anybody but Lebanese people [ . . . ] because that’s all her mother and daddy knew, you know, was Lebanese people.” Not until the 1940s and ’50s, when the Lebanese began to move into white neighborhoods and Lebanese children began to attend white public schools, did social interaction with white Mississippians begin. Rapid Americanization of Lebanese children allowed a cultural connection, if not a racial one, to form between the Lebanese and whites.

But the Lebanese had come from a culture where these racial tensions did not exist, although they were, in fact, victims of other forms of oppression and violence at the hands of the Ottoman Empire, a violence that some participants put forth as reason for their racial tolerance. In these oral histories narrators remember working with and living alongside African-American

Mississippians, as well as with other immigrant groups. Yet, despite speaking frankly and sympathetically about the plight of African Americans in Mississippi, they are sometimes reticent to discuss acts of bigotry directed toward themselves, at least beyond exclusion from social organizations. For example, when I asked Dolores Thomas Ulmer to describe some of the instances of social exclusion that her family experienced, she told me, “I really don’t want to say. Me, I couldn’t join certain sororities at Ole Miss.”<sup>5</sup> There are silences throughout these interviews of racist acts directed toward them personally, although that is not always the case.<sup>6</sup>

The eventual acceptance by white society has resulted in a “whitening” of the Lebanese ethnicity. One example of this process of whitening can be found in a 2005 *Greenwood Commonwealth* article written about Greenwood Country Club’s first black members: “Alex Malouf, who founded and runs John-Richard, a home furnishings manufacturer and distributor, is a white member of the Greenwood Country Club.”<sup>7</sup> Greenwood native Alex Malouf, however, is a particularly successful Lebanese businessman. Although the article previously mentions the one-time exclusion of Catholics, Jews, Asians, and Middle Easterners from the Greenwood Country Club, it never makes mention of the fact that Malouf himself is Lebanese. Malouf, today, is merely “white.” It is as if Malouf’s “whitening”—perhaps because of his financial success, perhaps because of Americanization—is complete.

Another newspaper article, this time in the *Los Angeles Times*, actually attempts to define “whiteness” in the twenty-first-century Mississippi Delta. Reporter Gregory Rodriguez asks seventy-one-year-old former Sunflower County sheriff Ned Holder, “Are Lebanese white

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<sup>5</sup> Dolores Thomas Ulmer, in discussion with author, Jackson, Mississippi, January 5, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Reticence to discuss painful or ugly experiences by oral history participants allows subjects to control the narrative of their own lives and the lives of the group. While several participants in this project discuss the frequent ostracism of the group from white society, few are willing to relate instances of personal attack. Lenore Layman discusses oral history participants’ use of reticence in her article, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alisair Thomson, rev. ed. (1998; repr., London: Routledge, 2015) 234–52.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Montgomery, “Greenwood Country Club Makes Quiet Changes,” the *Greenwood Commonwealth* (November 20, 2005).

people?” “Yes,” he answers, “although they’re real dark.” Rodriguez goes on to ask about the whiteness of Italian Catholics, Jews, and the Chinese: “Yes,” he said. “They go to the white schools.” Asked about Mexicans, Holder claims, “They’re becoming more white. More of them are getting an education.” “Then what’s a white person?” Rodriguez asked. Holder concluded that it was probably anybody “who isn’t black.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the gradual whitening of the Lebanese, the desire to maintain a Lebanese identity remains strong. Participants in this project remember that their parents often had no desire to return to the mother country, although many of the participants in this project either wanted to return to that place or actually did so. Further, as Alfred J. Katool tells us, the Cedars of Lebanon Club—a family-oriented social and civic club affiliated with the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs—in Jackson has continued to meet in the same building since 1938. The Lebanese community in Vicksburg has held an annual Lebanese dinner at St. George Church every year for sixty years now. Lebanese families still have close connections to each other as a result of their shared pasts. This project allows the viewer/listener to know what these things were like “from the standpoint of lived experience.”<sup>9</sup> While I approach the collection of interviews as gathering life stories, I have done so with a particular goal in mind: to record the history of a group of people who share a common experience. The narrative I present tells these stories using many voices.

Planning for this thesis project began in July 2016 when I co-organized a preliminary lecture/exhibit event with the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University. This well-attended event took place in Vicksburg in February 2017, and during the two-day event several dozen Lebanese Vicksburgers and Jacksonians

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory Rodriguez, “Definitions of Whiteness amid the Delta Blues,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *Gone Home*, 6.

attended talks, a film, and a workshop on collecting family histories. Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the community, I began fieldwork for this thesis project in the fall of 2017. Since then I have collected twenty-two interviews with twenty-four subjects from across the state. I have added a small selection of my previously recorded interviews to this project. I have conducted interviews in Oxford, Jackson, Vicksburg, Greenwood, Leland, Madison, Cleveland, Marks, Ridgeland, and Clarksdale with Lebanese Mississippians whose families come from these towns, as well as from Greenville and Shaw. The majority of the participants are first-generation American-born Mississippians. There are slightly fewer women interviewed than men, and only one interviewee who was below the age of twenty-five at the time of the interview. One participant is not a descendant of the first wave of Lebanese immigration to America, but Samir Husni's story—of immigrating to America in the 1980s as an escape from war—mirrors the journey other Lebanese immigrants took almost a hundred years earlier.

In addition to audio recordings of these interviews, I have made photo portraits of several of the participants, as well as photographs or scans of family photographs, wedding licenses, obituaries, personal letters, unpublished family histories, and personal documents. These materials serve to propel the narrative of the history of the Lebanese in the state, showing documents ranging from naturalization papers to the sale of the last family-owned parcels of property back in the homeland. I intend to archive these materials—including digital files of photographs, video recordings (new and archival), and complete transcripts and audio recordings of interviews—in the University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections. Little scholarly information specific to this group has heretofore appeared in the historical record. Thus, this oral history project makes valuable resources accessible to researchers and scholars of ethnicity studies, Mississippi history, southern history, gender studies, food studies, sociology, race

studies, and religious studies. Further, since this online project is a living document, I will be able to continually add to, broaden, and reframe the project after the MFA thesis work is completed.

The written component of this thesis comes in two forms. The first is that which is accessible through the online project—the short history of the Lebanese in Mississippi, biographical sketches of project participants, material preceding audio material that contextualizes the narrative pieces, a history of the Jackson Cedars of Lebanon Club, captions that describe images and documents, and the author’s statement. The second form of written component for this thesis—this paper—includes a description of methodology, the interview process, and the project workflow. The results of this oral history project fit neatly into a narrative of the Lebanese experience in Mississippi. Therefore, by using in-depth oral histories conducted between 2007 and 2018, this paper supplements the online component and places participants’ stories in a written narrative context.<sup>10</sup> This written component is intended to add a more scholarly dimension and academic analysis to the thesis project, but it is not intended to accompany the online project, although some of the text can be found in both.

#### Method: Oral History

I chose oral history as the documentary method for this thesis because the practice provides me a unique opportunity to utilize the memories of the Lebanese past to create a living

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<sup>10</sup> For a selection of works in this tradition, see *These Are Our Lives: As Told by People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia* (1939), *Who Speaks for the Negro?* by Robert Penn Warren (1965), *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller (1998), *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, by Alessandro Portelli (2011), *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia*, by Karida L. Brown (2018), and *Speaking of Feminism: Today’s Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of the US Women’s Movement* (2019).



art form, what I consider a narrative in many voices. Further, it provides an opportunity to those who have not been translated or interpreted by historians or other storytellers to have their stories heard, weighting often-neglected stories with apt significance. Further still, these oral histories place the Lebanese within the context of Mississippi and within particular contexts (Jim Crow, etc.), and they allow us to understand all of these things by way of the individual, using a nonlinear narrative documentary form.

Online oral history projects that have served as models and inspiration for the Lebanese in Mississippi project include “Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project,” which is “dedicated to preserving, educating, and sharing the story of World War II-era incarceration of Japanese Americans in order to deepen understandings of American history and inspire action for equity”; “Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South,” which exists to “to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s”; the Arab American National Museum online collections; and “Reclaiming the University of the People,” which “documents and interprets the history of how Black students and workers engaged in movements for racial justice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1951 to 2018.” While “Behind the Veil” is primarily a collection of interviews, my project is most like Charlotte Fryar’s dissertation project, “Reclaiming the University,” and “Densho,” both of which offer essays or webpages divided by themes and that contain audio, documents, and various forms of media—curated exhibits in an online platform.

The oral history interviews explore a number of themes. Jim Angelo tells about how his parents could speak Arabic, but they never taught their children to speak the language. Mary Louise Nosser talks about her love of both Mississippi history and her Lebanese heritage in the

same passage by discussing her work as tour guide at the Vicksburg National Battleground and her participation in organizing the annual Lebanese dinner at St. George. Marie Antoon talks about her grandparents' journey to America and her grandfathers' experiences as peddlers. And twenty-four-year-old Matthew Tonos talks about not fully understanding his Lebanese identity until he came to college at the University of Mississippi and began studying Arabic and Middle Eastern history. Themes such as these are explored within individuals' pages, with some participants focusing more heavily on a wide range of subjects and some focusing more intently on one or two ideas. Together, the interviews construct a communal memory of the Lebanese in Mississippi, much in the way Alessandro Portelli documents and portrays the lives of mining families in Harlan County, Kentucky, in *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Using oral history to tell the story of the Lebanese in Mississippi provides us with, as Linda Shopes claims, the opportunity for "the advancement of new interpretations about the lives and struggles of those marginalized, ignored, or misconstrued in our collective record of the past."<sup>11</sup>

I began my preparation for this project by first researching early Lebanese history in Syria, reasons for their emigration, where they went, experiences in new lands, occupations once there, assimilation to new cultures, and representations and preservation of their ethnic identity as time went on. Next, I identified potential narrators, beginning with those Lebanese in the state whom I already knew and then being directed to others who might be interested in participating. I did not previously know most of the narrators who ended up participating in this project. Some were of Lebanese decent on both sides of their families, and some on only one. I did not preference one or the other. Contact with them came easily, as participants made prior contact on my behalf with those referrals. Once contacted, I made appointments to meet with the narrators

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<sup>11</sup> Shopes, Linda. "'Insights and Oversights': Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History." *Oral History Review* 2 (2014): 267.

in a quiet place of their choosing, generally their home or in an office space. I recorded audio for each interview, and I filmed a few as well. For example, selections of video footage of my interviews with Pam Mayfield and with Marie Antoon are on their individual pages on the website. While at the interview session, I took portrait photographs of most narrators, and I photographed family artifacts that can also be found on the narrators' project pages. Each interview has been transcribed.

### Audio Documentary

A portion of this project features oral history interviews in four traditional audio documentary segments: "Leaving the Mountain," "Coming to America, Settling in Mississippi," "Living in the Jim Crow South," and "Maintaining an Ethnic Identity." The produced audio documentaries offer the listener another way to engage with the narratives. Rather than listening to the stories of the project's participants individually, as one would if exploring the entire online project, the audio documentaries place the stories in a more immediate thematic proximity to one another and highlight communal memory and the broader narrative aspect of the project.

"Segment 1: Leaving the Mountain" focuses on stories Lebanese immigrants handed down to subsequent generations on why their families left Syria en masse in the late 1800s/early 1900s. "Segment 2: Coming to America, Settling in Mississippi" tells the story of those immigrants' arrival in America and early lives in Mississippi. "Segment 3: Living in the Jim Crow South" places the Lebanese squarely in twentieth-century Mississippi, operating in a world suspended between that of black and white, building a working relationship with both blacks and whites while by and large attempting to avoid the oppression blacks were experiencing. The

fourth and final segment, “Maintaining an Ethnic Identity,” explores the process of Americanization the Lebanese underwent while simultaneously maintaining an ethnic identity.

## II: MISSISSIPPI MAHJAR: A HISTORY OF THE LEBANESE IN THE STATE

This project is rooted in history, but the stories that I've collected not only fit into that narrative, but they go a long way to inform it as well. A large part of this written portion of the MFA thesis works to place these stories within the context of the place from which these narrators' families emigrated, as well as to contextualize the place to which they were immigrating and what they discovered there. The oral histories help bring this history to life, to put recognizable voices in the narrative, and to give voice to an otherwise rarely told tale.

At its core, *The Lebanese in Mississippi: An Oral History* is a collection of memories. It is a collective oral record, either recalled or passed down across generations, by members of a community who came to America neither on the *Mayflower* nor on the *Clotilda*, but oftentimes as steerage passengers on ships like the *Majestic*. Each of the participants in this project contributes a piece of an inherited puzzle, and the themes that emerge from this collection demonstrate a collective understanding of why such a large number of Lebanese-Syrians left "the Mountain" and traveled west as far as the Americas. They illustrate an understanding of how and why these people came to Mississippi, what their lives were like living in a biracial society, how they chose to make a living and find a place within that place, all while maintaining an ethnic identity.

## Leaving the Mountain

Between the 1880s and the end of World War I, a combination of famines, epidemics, extreme poverty, and religious and political genocide led to more than 100,000 deaths in the Mount Lebanon region of Ottoman Empire-controlled Syria. During that same period, over 100,000 Lebanese residents of the predominantly Christian region participated in a mass migration that scattered them across the globe to places such as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.<sup>12</sup> While most of these Lebanese citizens intended to emigrate only until conditions at home had improved, many eventually realized that the life of an immigrant in the United States was preferable to that on what was commonly known as “the Mountain.” Thus, many Lebanese found themselves in Mississippi fleeing hardship and oppression, and settling, perhaps ironically, in the caste-based, Jim Crow Delta, where they were considered neither black nor white. As this study illustrates, these Lebanese immigrants—mostly male—found work peddling wares to blacks and whites across the Delta, forming close economic bonds in and with black communities, and hoping to one day assimilate into the economically and socially dominant white community—all while retaining vital elements of their own cultural heritage.

## Why They Emigrated

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<sup>12</sup> Samir Khalaf, “The Background and Causes of Lebanese/Syrian Immigration to the United States before World War I,” in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940*, ed. Eric Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 19; Philip K. Hitti, *A Short History of Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 207; Charles Issawi, “The Historical Background of Lebanese Emigration, 1800–1914,” in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1992), 31.

The literature that exists concerning the Syro-Lebanese condition in the years between the turn of the century and the First World War generally offers religious, social, and political persecution by the vast ruling-class majority of Muslims as a primary cause, if not *the* primary cause, of the mass emigration from the Mountain to the United States and other friendlier environments. For example, in 1924 Philip K. Hitti wrote in *The Syrians in America* that “under the yoke of the Turks, the [Syrian Christians of Mount Lebanon] were subjected to numerous restrictions and often to active measures of persecution. Four long centuries of oppression were evidently not enough to obliterate their yearning for freedom. Failing to enjoy it in their native land, many of them sought it abroad.”<sup>13</sup>

Hitti’s claim that persecution of Lebanese Christians by the Ottoman Turks and neighboring Druze Muslims is widely considered to be the chief cause for emigration is not atypical. In fact, much modern literature still makes the argument that this was a primary reason for emigration from Lebanon. A number of other texts echo these sentiments, and many of them do so with a liberal amount of venom directed at the Turkish government.<sup>14</sup> But whether starvation and poverty were a result of wartime embargos and blockades, natural disasters, and plagues or a result of “systematic persecution” characterized by the denial of natural resources and economic and medical neglect often seems to be a matter of conjecture and opinion today. No study denies the human suffering that occurred in the Mountain just before and during the Great War and during the social upheaval in the years between 1858 and 1860. The fact that Christians in the Mountain experienced intense misery during those periods is well documented. More recently, though, scholars have questioned whether the mass emigration out of Mount

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<sup>13</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *Lebanon in History from the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1957) viii.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Philip M. Kayal and Joseph M. Kayal, *The Syrian–Lebanese in America: A Study in Religion and Assimilation* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975).

Lebanon between 1878 and 1924 was a direct result of the persecution of Christians at the hands of the Ottoman administration. Some scholars have gone so far as to label this notion a “persecution myth,” while fully acknowledging the widespread suffering of Christians in the region.

Scholars have offered various reasons for the supposed invention of this hypothetical persecution myth. Akram Khater, Middle Eastern historian at North Carolina State University, suggests that various writers, such as Abraham Rihibany, George Haddad, and Philip Hitti, were attempting to establish a “Maronite nation” in Lebanon, and “to bring such a project to successful fruition, it was necessary to enlist the support of Western powers by appealing to them along the assumed common lines of Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> Reports of Turkish persecution, Khater further maintains, were “corroborated” by popular western press and missionaries returning from Lebanon. Furthermore, Khater claims that the failing silk industry, and the dire poverty that followed as a result, was another significant cause for mass emigration from the region.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the reason, the Lebanese in Mississippi, at least those in this project, consistently maintain—as a result of stories being handed down to them across generations—that brutality at the hands of the Turkish Muslims was nearly the sole cause for this first wave of emigration from the homeland and into America. Some spoke very definitively about that brutality. For example, Dave Sherman said without pause:

I can tell you why Papa left and Mama left Lebanon. It may not be what you have heard already. The Turkish army went in my mother’s home, when her mother cooked a

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<sup>15</sup> Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Akram Fouad Khater, “‘House’ to ‘Goddess of the House’: Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28, no. 3 (Aug. 1996): 326.



chicken dinner, and the Turkish army went in there, about six of them, and took everything they had off the table and went underneath a tree and sat there and ate all the food. So, they were really mistreated, and they wanted to leave that part of the country for that reason.<sup>17</sup>

Dan Nicholas claimed that leaving the Mountain was “for a better opportunity.” That opportunity was “economic,” according to Nicholas, but the source of financial hardship was the Ottoman Turks:

The main thing is they really disliked the Ottoman Empire. The Turks. They felt like the Christians were being discriminated against. Businesswise they had a— I think at that time they even had a draft for the Turkish army, and I think the same reason I think the reason they left there is the same reason we have immigrants today. For a better opportunity.

When asked about knowledge of the silk industry and its roll in Lebanese emigration, most participants in this study claimed to either have no knowledge of it or some vague knowledge, but none claimed it as the impetus for leaving. Louise Abraham Wilson from Clarksdale had heard some stories from her mother about the sericulture industry on the Mountain:

Mama had what you make with the worms. You made silkworms, and she did say she got up every morning and did something with the silkworms, but I never did understand. I guess they do make silk something with it. Well, that’s what she did first over there, and I

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<sup>17</sup> Dave Sherman, in discussion with the author, Oxford, Mississippi, December 12, 2017.

was thinking she might have made a living doing that because you had to get up early, and I never did know what she did. I didn't want to hear her say she squashed them or whatever she did. They use to talk about it, you know, and I never did understand how they did, because I was so interested in her even having worms there, and what they did, or who they sold them to. I don't know why I didn't ask those questions.<sup>18</sup>

Keith Fulcher's grandmother did not mince words about the reason for her family leaving Syria, and his memories of her stories stayed with him well into his adulthood, but his interest in his family history also led him to more deeply understand the full story of Lebanese immigration to the state—a history that has not been passed down as part of Lebanese family histories:

The damn Turks. The damn Arabs. My grandmother, [when I was] growing up always talked about the “damn Arabs” and slaughtering the Lebanese Mount Lebanon north of Beirut area. So I just did a little reading about it and finally learned about the Ottoman Empire and the Turks and, you know, World War I had the highest per cap death rate in any area of the world in World War I and it was primarily through because of starvation. Turks had cut off pre-World War I, and I even read about the Armenian's being slaughtered. So why they came that was one reason.

The other reason I heard is because of the silk trade. China opening up the silk trade and their economy just bottomed out in North Lebanon. So those are two reasons I've heard but which one influenced my two sets of relatives I have no idea. So I have talked to other family members, extended family members who have actual documentation about the horrors of pre-war World War I and their families endured in

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<sup>18</sup> Louise Abraham Wilson, in discussion with the author, Clarksdale, Mississippi, February 2, 2018.

the same region because of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. I have not substantiated that my family actually experienced that kind of tragic loss of life.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Ann Rice Lefoldt, too, had been told a similar story: “The reason they wanted to get out, the Muslims were persecuting the Christians in Lebanon, and they, of course, were Orthodox Catholic, you know, Eastern Orthodox Catholics. And they were about to starve to death. It was bad.”<sup>20</sup> Al Katool, Sr., of Jackson, also spoke with supposed weight of fact about his own family coming to America and the historical reasons behind their relocation: “The Ottoman Empire, Turkish, the Muslims, they were conscripting all the young men from fourteen up or fifteen up into their army, training them and turning them right around to massacre their own people. So they were sending their boys over here. They were trying to get over here.”<sup>21</sup>

Whatever the reasons for emigration out of Syria were, the commonly told story of that exodus is repeatedly related as fact in the twenty-first century by descendants of that first wave of Lebanese immigrants. Although more than a few scholars have commented on the dreadful conditions on Mount Lebanon as being the push factor for emigration, the silences found in the narratives of subsequent generations are profound. It seems that what is handed down passes for something akin to a “folk history,” or a local history, of a people in a region. In this sense, the usefulness of oral history as a means to relate an accurate and authentic history prior to participants’ experience is called into question, although, as Nicholas Mariner claims, “Local history proponents have suggested the use of oral history due to the scarcity in local records to support other traditional types of historical inquiry. Within such tradition, local historians often

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<sup>19</sup> Keith Fulcher, in discussion with the author, Marks, Mississippi, December 6, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Ann Lefoldt Rice, in discussion with author, Jackson, Mississippi, October 13, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred J. Katool Sr., in discussion with author, Jackson, Mississippi, October 13, 2017.

address the relationship between local history, oral history, and folklore.”<sup>22</sup> The difference here, however, is that the history of nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon region of Syria is not “scarce.” Oppression meted out and suffering caused by the Ottoman Turks is well documented. It is the partial history routinely accepted as the whole truth that is troublesome to some historians.

I am not arguing that twenty-first-century Mississippians are or should be the custodians of history, but that these Mississippians’ construction of their own identity is influenced by the stories they have been told. Thus, the identity held by multiple generations of Lebanese Mississippians is an identity of an oppressed people who fled a violent and brutal homeland to find their way to a new land and succeed there. Oral history has given us at least a partial picture of this group of people—one that can be assumed to be at least partially accurate—but perhaps not the complete picture. But more than a record of history, these stories related in this project provide a means of self-identification, which in turn, as we will see, helps us to understand the group more deeply.

## The Journey Over

Despite the claims of persecution, as well as the well-documented instances of poverty and starvation, a good many of the Lebanese emigrants who traveled to America before the turn of the century and in the years directly following fully intended to return to the homeland after they had gone abroad to make their fortunes. Some left wives and children behind. Some wives even left husbands, with promises of sending money back home to the family as they acquired it. And some took entire families along, as well as most of their meager belongings, realizing they

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Mariner, “Oral History: From Fact Finding to History Shaping,” in *Historia* 14 (2005): 64.

may never set foot upon their native soil again. Jim Angelos's family resettled elsewhere in the world prior to making their way to America:

My mother was born El Munsef, Lebanon, and she was born on July 18, 1906. She was just short of being fourteen years old when they moved to the United States from the Middle East. They came from the Middle East on a ship to Marseille, France, and stayed in Marseille about a month or so according to my mother before they boarded a ship again to the United States. And the ship they came on, which is documented on the Ellis Island website, is the *Adriatic*.

My mother told me that she and her parents, my grandparents, A. Farriss and Zolfa Farriss, came to the United States and arrived at Ellis Island about May 15th or 20th of 1920. They had family that had preceded them here.<sup>23</sup>

When Lebanese migration to America began to increase in the 1880s, Lebanese immigrants to America made their first US stop at New York's Ellis Island. The US Bureau of Immigration's health policies, however, were far stricter there than in other ports. New Orleans was one of those less-strict ports, as were ports in places further south, such as those along the Mexican Gulf and Caribbean coasts, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and Brazil. Tales of those circuitous routes are common. Ellis Antoon described how his father was refused entry at Ellis Island but figured out an alternate passage into the country:

Daddy came at the age of sixteen. Tried the entry port at New York City and was turned down. At that time, it was common. They had help along the line, as they came from

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<sup>23</sup> Jim Angelo, in discussion with author, Vicksburg, Mississippi, February 3, 2018.

Syria or Lebanon to wherever they come, they had help. But anyway, they sent him to Puerto Rico. He was let in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was a possession of the United States, so he just came to the United States. He didn't have any problem. That was a way of getting around it.<sup>24</sup>

Al Katool's family's story is similar to Antoon's:

My grandmother was pregnant with my dad, but my grandfather left, and he had three children that he left with his wife. Her name was Nimnon Dahduh. Left her in Lebanon with the three children. He came over here in 1898. He earned enough money to bring my father and his sister over. So, they left Shwaer and went to Tripoli, Syria, and then caught a ship from Tripoli to Marseille, France. They were going to catch another ship to come to New York. Ellis Island. But in those days they had a worldwide trachoma epidemic, and there was another family on that ship that came from Tripoli that didn't have passage on the next ship out from Marseille, France. My father's and aunt's ship was supposed to leave the next day after they got there, but the other family told the port authorities that my father and his sister came from a family in Syria that had the pinkeye. So they wouldn't let them on the ship, and this family got on it, the one that lied about it. They were stranded in Marseille, France, until the next ship could come out. They finally got passage, and they came through Cuba. That ship came through Cuba and then up into New Orleans. Then my grandfather Katool brought his wife and his older son over.

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<sup>24</sup> Ellis Antoon, in discussion with author, Greenwood, Mississippi, November 10, 2017.

Dolores Thomas Ulmer heard stories of her grandfather and great-grandmother expecting to land and remain in northern Africa before being unexpectedly rerouted across the Atlantic to the US:

My grandfather was Sawaya Norman (S.N.) Thomas, and they lived in the mountains up in Lebanon. His father died when he was very young. There was no work to be had, and they were extremely poor. His mother had a cousin or relative who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. And so when S. N. was fourteen years old, his mother said she would get on a ship with him that was going to Alexandria, and this person would find him work. So they got on the ship in 1894, I believe it was, and sailed to Egypt. When they got to Egypt there was a disease. It wasn't the bubonic plague, but something similar to the plague, and they would not let the passengers off the ship. So the next stop for that ship was the United States of America. He and his mother went on and sailed to America, probably in horrible conditions on the ship because they had very little with them. It was just going to be a hop, skip, and jump for her and then she wouldn't stay there. She was going to go back to Lebanon, but when they got to America they would not let them off at Ellis Island until they could find somebody that would sponsor this young man of fourteen—to pay for him to get off the boat, guarantee him a job, and find him a place to live. So they waited, and someone knew of a man in New York who sponsored several Lebanese immigrants to enter into the United States. His name escapes me. So he took S. N. and his mother, and took them both off the ship—he was in the dry goods business—and took them into Manhattan and found them a place to live. It was in this little bitty basement in one of the buildings, and it cost them little money or no money at all because it had no windows. The one window it did have was boarded up, and it was infested with varmints, so

nobody wanted to live there, but you know S. N. and his mama needed a place to stay, so they were grateful to be there. And the man who took them off the ship gave S. N. some notions, and told him he could peddle from door to door and sell these wares to make a living. Eventually he worked his way up. And that's basically how they got to America.<sup>25</sup>

Despite what frustration some of these travelers must have experienced, their paths generally ended on a positive note, if not at the expected destination. But that did not mean things ended well for everyone. Families, like Gloria Thomas's, were sometimes split up, never to see each other again:

Mother was born in Del Ophna, Lebanon. Of course, back then they called it Syria. She came to this country when she was one year old, on a ship called the *Majestic*. She came with her mother and daddy and aunt and uncle, and some friends came, too. And when they went to Ellis Island, my grandmother's sister's husband had an eye infection, like pink eye or something, so they would not allow him to come into the country. My grandmother's sister wanted to be with him. My grandmother didn't know where they went, and she never saw her again. That always bothered my grandmother so bad. I can remember her crying and everything because she never got to see her sister again. They found out later they were in Brazil. Years later they found that out. Mother was one year old.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ulmer, January 5, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Gloria Shamoun Thomas, in discussion with author, Leland, Mississippi, November 11, 2017.



Most of the narrators in this project were able to recall stories similar to these—tales of ancestors’ travels to France, Egypt, Mexico, and South America before winding up in Mississippi, a place that was in many ways both similar and very foreign to these immigrants.

### Where They Were Going

For decades, observers from within and beyond the mostly rural Mississippi Delta have chiefly defined the region as a black/white society that consisted primarily of planter-class and poor whites, and slaves-turned-sharecroppers-turned-impoverished blacks. The reality, however, is that the region has long been peopled with inhabitants as diverse and distinctive as its soil is fertile.

As we have seen, it was during this first wave of Syro-Lebanese immigration across the globe that the Lebanese—along with Jews, Chinese, and Italians—began to immigrate into Mississippi. The earliest report of a Lebanese immigrant entering the Mississippi *mahjar* (roughly translated from the Arabic as “the land of immigration”) is of young Elias Naseef Fattouh, from the coastal village of El Munsif. Traveling alone to the Port of New Orleans in 1884, Fattouh knew he needed to make contact with other Syrians, so he stood on the dock and repeatedly cried out, “Kibbee, kibbee, kibbee!” (Kibbee—a mixture of ground lamb, bulgur wheat, and spices—is commonly considered the national dish of Lebanon; anyone who had lived in Mount Lebanon or Syria would have undoubtedly understood the cry.) A Syrian merchant soon approached him and offered to help by supplying him with enough merchandise to begin peddling. Shortly thereafter, Fattouh found himself traveling the Louisiana and Mississippi landscape northward along the Mississippi River. Fattouh walked the rural roads peddling his

wares for a few years, and after saving enough money and acquiring a bit of credit, he was able to open his own dry goods store in the small town of Hermanville, Mississippi, becoming the first-known Lebanese immigrant to settle in the state.<sup>27</sup>

Other Lebanese immigrants followed Fattouh—through various ports—to the area and set up shops and home bases out of which to peddle and, within a few short years, other families from towns and villages like El Munsif immigrated to Mississippi. By the turn of the century, few families were returning to the Mountain for good, although members of most made occasional trips between the state and Syria.<sup>28</sup> Mary Louise Nosser recalls her father's migration-to-Mississippi story, following family here, as was often the case:

My daddy was from Sheikhan, and my mama was from Bekhaaz. Daddy came to the United States, I think he was around seventeen years old, I'm not sure. It would have been 1920. August 27, 1920. I think he said he said he had about fifty-five cents in his pocket by the time he got here to Vicksburg. Actually, he was a little late getting to Vicksburg because his cousin on the same ship needed some more money, so Daddy waited at Ellis Island while the officials contacted his uncle in Vicksburg for more money, and they took care of him. Daddy said everybody was especially nice, and I'm always glad to hear that, because it's always easy to mistreat people like that, you know? But anyway, his uncle sent him more money, and they put his name on a piece of paper on the label of his shirt, put him on the train, and sent him to Vicksburg. For some reason or other he decided to go to Cleveland, Ohio. He heard they had a lot of good jobs up there and everything, so he went up there and worked at several jobs, and one of them

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph Schechla, "Dabkeh in the Delta," in *Taking Root: Arab-American Community Studies*, ed. Eric Hooglund, Washington, D.C.: The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, ADC Research Institute (1985), 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

was a candy factory. Then he came on to Vicksburg, and he worked eighteen months with his Farris cousins, T. D. and J. D. They had a little grocery store on the corner and they trained him how to work there and everything, and then they found him a little grocery store at 901 Washington Street in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and there he remained for seventy-four years.<sup>29</sup>

Mary Anne Lefoldt's grandparents also followed family to Mississippi, and once they arrived here her grandfather worked at the most common profession available to Lebanese immigrants: peddling.

My father, Joseph Rice, was born in 1910 in the mountains in Hemlaya, Lebanon, and they came over in 1920. He was around ten years old. My grandfather, George Doumit Ryas, had some family who had come to Detroit, Michigan. So, that's where they went to check everything out. My grandmother Yesmine, we called her Big Yesmine, she did not like Detroit. She told my grandfather she wanted to come down to Mississippi, where the Josephs were. Ellis and Albert Joseph were her first cousins. So my grandfather comes down to Jackson to see if he can make a living, and he, obviously, comes back and gets them. My grandfather and my daddy—and he would've been, probably, anywhere from twelve to fifteen by then—peddled. They had a truck, and they peddled.<sup>30</sup>

### Pack Peddling

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Louise Nosser, in discussion with author, Vicksburg, Mississippi, October 14, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Mary AnnRice Lefoldt, in discussion with author, Jackson, Mississippi, October 13, 2017.

Overall immigration to Mississippi, from all corners of the globe, was rapidly increasing.<sup>31</sup> Some of these Lebanese immigrants were opening stores in towns, but many of them had to make do peddling to outlying farms before they could afford to make the larger investment of business ownership. Like Mary Ann Lefoldt and her family, the vast majority of first-generation Mississippi Lebanese started out peddling goods door-to-door. No training was necessary, and advanced English-language skills were not essential. The products they sold—everything from pins and needles, buttons, lace, bolts of cloth, and kitchen utensils to jewelry, perfume, fancy mirrors, bric-a-brac, and holy items, such as rosaries and crucifixes—could sell themselves. Also, peddling suited the independent Lebanese inclination. Peddlers operated on their own terms, without having to answer to an overseer or submitting to the daily confinement and drudgery of factory work, as was often the case in the cities of the Upper Midwest and Northeast. Gregory Thomas recalled, “I remember my grandfather always telling me, ‘Son, I don’t care if you have to sell peanuts on the street, you work for yourself. Don’t make another man rich.’”<sup>32</sup>

But the peddling life was far from easy. Chafik Chamoun of Clarksdale, whose grandfather peddled around Brookhaven, Mississippi in the late 1800s, said of his grandfather’s work: “Oh, they [walked] probably about twenty-five, thirty miles . . . and they spend the night in the black people’s homes. They [had] no vehicle, no donkey, no horse, nothing. They were tough. They put something on their back, and they [went] house to house.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, a peddler’s “store” encompassed the entire countryside, come rain or shine. If a peddler was unable to secure

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<sup>31</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, Warren County boasted more immigrants than any county in the state. Between 1822 and 1906, the Warren County Circuit Court processed 666 total immigrants. *Index to Naturalization Records of Mississippi Courts 1798–1906* (prepared by the Old Law Naturalization Project, Service Division, Work Projects Administration, Jackson, MS, 1942), 163.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Thomas, in discussion with author, Vicksburg, Mississippi, April 14, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Chafik Chamoun, in discussion with author, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 6, 2007.

lodging for the night in a farmer's home or barn, he or she slept under the stars. And since it was necessary to draw an income year-round, pack-peddlers preferred a temperate climate. In addition to the warm, accommodating weather in the Mississippi Delta, the region also provided a large rural market for pack-peddlers. During the busy farming seasons, farm families who lived in isolated areas found it more convenient to buy goods from a peddler than to spend a day traveling into town.

Louise Abraham Wilson recalled to me a story of her father's adventures on the road:

I don't know whether Papa moved to Vicksburg first or not, because all of them were going to Vicksburg at one time, but then they came to they came to Clarksdale. They were peddling, so he and his brother came to town and filled up a suitcase of clothes, he said, and they would go from house to house in the country. One time, nighttime came on and it got cold, so they offered a lady fifty cents to sleep at her house. She told them, "I don't have a couch, but you can sleep somewhere." The next morning ended up with them both waking up in the bed with her. I don't know if they had to pay extra or not.<sup>34</sup>

Stories from life on the road filtered down to later generations, and some of those stories, like this one told by Charles Shamoun, reflected the trajectory of these peddlers' livelihood:

These folks that peddled had a rack they'd put on their back and had to walk it. They walked to the plantations and sold to the people who worked for the plantation. My granddaddy walked back home everyday. He peddled to these houses on these plantations, and when he gave them credit he'd write on the house in Arabic how much

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<sup>34</sup> Louise Abraham Wilson, February 2, 2018.

they owed him so he would know when he went back how much they owed him. Well, eventually the darn plantation owner had all the tenant houses painted, and when my granddaddy came back, they said we don't owe you nothing. [Laughs] All the debt got wiped out, so that's when he quit doing it.<sup>35</sup>

By 1910, many peddlers were sending for their entire families and setting down roots, deciding that life in Mississippi was far and away better than a life in Lebanon. Although more and more Lebanese immigrants fled Mount Lebanon for Mississippi, where friends and relatives were succeeding in self-owned businesses, the occupation of peddling was in decline. One reason, perhaps, was that over time families grew larger, necessitating a less mobile, more stable homeplace. Another reason was that their clientele base was diminishing. The racial and economic climate for black sharecroppers—a large portion of the peddlers' customers—in Mississippi was worsening as plantations consolidated and centralized business.<sup>36</sup> The years between 1915 and 1920 saw a mass exodus of 100,000 blacks from the state, and with that shift, the stream of cash that had flowed into the pockets of peddlers began to dry up.<sup>37</sup>

### Setting Up Shop

The pioneer peddlers had done well in saving money. Thus, as their rural customer base steadily dwindled, they abandoned the long and lonely life on the road and settled down in towns, where they opened grocery and dry goods stores. For example, James Ellis had peddled

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Shamoun, in discussion with author, Leland, Mississippi, November 11, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*, New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2003.

around central Mississippi for several years before opening a general merchandise store in Port Gibson with his brothers, who had also peddled. The brothers lived together above the store until each got married and moved into their own homes. They collected a sizable amount of real estate, and in 1927 James's brother Mike built and opened a dry goods store of his own, as did his brother George. Jim's other brother, Sam, moved to Texas to open his own business. The Ellis brothers' sister, Nazera, married a Lebanese man named George Thomas, and together they opened a grocery store behind their house on College Street.<sup>38</sup>

Like the Ellis brothers, other families who came to Mississippi peddled before settling down in the grocery store and dry goods businesses. Around 1911, Abu Anees Mafrij—who changed his name to George B. Thomas once he decided to make the United States his family's new home—came to the Delta from Bishmezzine to begin peddling. After peddling for a few years, George settled his family in Greenville and opened a grocery store. Once his oldest son, Ernest, was old enough, he and his wife, Emma Ellis Thomas, established a grocery store of their own on Nelson Street. By 1927, the grocery store had grown into a successful business, but when the levees broke on the Mississippi River, causing the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the grocery store was flooded to its roof. The bulk shipment of foodstuffs they had recently received was ruined and his business was wiped out. Ernest packed what belongings he could salvage and moved with Emma to Vicksburg, her hometown.<sup>39</sup> The rest of the Thomas family remained in Greenville and reopened grocery stores and dry goods stores. Many of the descendants of George Thomas still live in Greenville, with others making up a large portion of the Lebanese population in nearby Leland.

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<sup>38</sup> Mary H. Ellis, *Cannonballs and Courage: The Story of Port Gibson* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Co., 2003), 92.

<sup>39</sup> Hooglund, *Taking Root*, 41.

Dave Sherman, who grew up in Greenville, recalls his family's transition from peddling to a less transient business:

Papa was a salesman with pillows, sheets, and white goods, and he walked from one town to another. From Mexico on to Hattiesburg. When he got married, then he moved to Lake Village, and Papa didn't want to move around anymore. In other words, he didn't want to leave the family and go walk down there. So he opened up a little wholesale place to sell to salesmen, like he was. And the 1927 flood came and wiped him out. You know, nobody had insurance, nobody knew about insurance then. So he found out that there was a grocery store for sale in Greenville, so he took Mama, and we moved over there. He moved the two children and Mama to Greenville, opened up his store.

Louise Abraham Wilson's father and uncle eventually left life on the road and settled in Clarksdale, where she told me he still depended in great measure on both black and white customers:

They opened a store. I don't know how big or where it was. It was a combination grocery and dry goods. It had two parts. Then later on it became a straight-out grocery store. But it was nice. Every Saturday, the people would come from the country to buy groceries. They had to take people home because they didn't have cars. So, they would charge them. Sometimes they wouldn't charge them if they bought a lot of groceries, but they would have someone take them home. He had both black and white customers, and



people that would get off at five o'clock might come by and buy their groceries for the night or something.<sup>40</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Lebanese depended almost entirely on the black trade. As Lebanese immigrants moved out of peddler settlements and into towns, they often moved into African American neighborhoods, where rents were cheaper. Ellis Antoon and his niece Marie Antoon described life in Greenwood:

ELLIS ANTOON: It was a way of life. There was probably, gosh, fifty, sixty, seventy small stores like my daddy's spread throughout the whole black community, on just about every corner. And all of them had their own trade in the black community. The farmers hired all kind of labor to chop the cotton and to pick the cotton, for farmhands. The cotton business was thriving, and we had an export situation here on the river, steamboats coming up the river and picking up bales of cotton and taking them down to the Mississippi River at Vicksburg, and from there, on. But theirs was a black trade.<sup>41</sup>

MARIE ANTOON: My grandfather owned a small corner grocery in Greenwood. It was right next to a black church. I think that some of the Lebanese communities were closer with blacks than other parts of the Delta communities. My grandfather's little grocery did a lot of business with that black church. They were, like, in the middle. They were not part of the black community, and maybe they were not part of the white establishment, but it is a story that I have heard others in the Delta tell, especially the Jewish merchants.

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<sup>40</sup> Louise Abraham Wilson, February 2, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Ellis Antoon, November 10, 2017.

I have talked to members of that community, and they said that they were in the middle. You know, the Jewish communities over in places like Greenville and Cleveland. They were doing a lot of business with African Americans at a time when other businesses were not.

In Clarksdale, where Davis still resides, the early Lebanese immigrants lived in the black neighborhood of Riverton. “My grandmother and a lot of the Abrahams and Gattises all lived in Riverton in the beginning,” he said. “African American, Italian American, and Lebanese American living together in Riverton, side by side. We grew up side by side with all them.”<sup>42</sup> Billy Rossie Tonos, born in the Delta town of Shaw in 1924 and the mother of Michael and Mary Tonos (both narrators in this project), remembers her multi-ethnic childhood neighborhood similarly:

There were other grocery stores [besides my father’s]. In fact, on the street where we lived, on the street where the store was, next door to us was a drugstore. It was owned by the Deans. Next to that a very nice family of Chinese people opened another grocery store, which was fine because competition is whatever it is. It’s supposed to be something. And then next to that was a Jewish family. The family name: Chiz. And they had a dry goods store. Mercantile, I guess, is what you would call it. Next door to that was a bakery owned by a German family.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Pat Davis Sr., in discussion with author, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 6, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Brenda Outlaw, interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi (F341.5.M57, vol. 748, pt. 2).

As immigrant merchants opened dry goods or grocery stores that either catered to blacks or were located in black neighborhoods, black shoppers found that they had a choice of places to shop where they might find respect. “In the older white stores,” writes John Dollard in his 1937 sociological study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, “when a Negro went in, the owner would say to him, ‘Well, boy, what do you want?’ even if the Negro in question were eighty years old. The Jews [and other immigrants], on the contrary, let the Negro know that his dollar was as good as anyone else’s.”<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, white merchants received less and less black business and were often crowded out of town by immigrant stores whose owners treated blacks with courtesy, or at least without discourtesy. It might stand to reason that whites would take umbrage in losing business to immigrants, but since whites often found that dealing with blacks was beneath them, the loss of a trade was not always resented by the white community.<sup>45</sup> Of course, white stores were not completely wiped out. Like most other social arrangements in Jim Crow Mississippi, stores became subject to those segregated conditions, spoken or unspoken. Whites may have needed black dollars, but they did not vigorously pursue them.<sup>46</sup>

Lebanese merchants new to the Delta found black customers to be helpful in gaining an understanding of the southern culture, mores, and even the language. Gregory Thomas said of his grandfather’s experience in his first grocery store, which faced the railroad tracks in Vicksburg: “It was a black man who helped him in the store who helped to teach them English. He told me somebody would come in and ask for one thing—and I forgot what the examples were—and he’d show them a plug of tobacco, and the black fellow would take his hand and say, ‘No, this is what they were asking for.’” They extended black customers fair lines of credit and made trades for goods when the cash was simply unavailable. Gregory recalled his grandfather, many years

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<sup>44</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 128.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>46</sup> Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 191.

later, trading goods for clothes at Abraham Bros. Department Store: “I remember once seeing a catfish hanging in the back of the store. A man had brought that in trade for clothes. Boxes and boxes of vegetables and things.”<sup>47</sup>

Dry goods and grocery stores were not the only kinds of businesses the ex-peddling Lebanese began, although most were merchants of one sort or another. Mary Tonos Brantley explained:

The Delta had such a polarization of the planter class and the lower class. And I always thought we fill that gap of the merchant class. Everybody in my family and extended family, I mean, we could go to a Lebanese person to buy shoes. My daddy’s older brother had a fabric store. We had a grocery store. There were Lebanese restaurants. There was another Lebanese grocery store. There were the Lebanese jewelry stores. So, it was phenomenal to me. Anything you needed to purchase, you could go to a Lebanese merchant. And if you wanted to build a house, there were some who were builders. You could trust them. They would treat you like family when you went there. They made enough money to buy property, and they had the work ethic to save and in just a few generations to put down some pretty deep roots.

Urban spaces allowed for a wider variety of opportunity. Al Katool’s father tried his hand at a number of occupations, eventually returning to Jackson to open a restaurant:

The story goes that when my father was a young man, he went to Pascagoula. Ingalls Shipyard was hiring to build ships. They had just opened up the shipyard there. He went

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<sup>47</sup> Gregory Thomas, in discussion with author, Vicksburg, Mississippi, April 14, 2007.

down and got a job with acetylene torch and all, and one day sparks got in his eye. He was taken to the company hospital. Next to his bed was a gentleman from Jackson. A Greek gentleman, Theo Grillis, had come down to visit the man. Mr. Grillis started talking to my dad, and he asked him where he's from. And he said, "Jackson, Mississippi." He said, "Well, that's where I'm from." Dad told him what had happened, and that he was going back to Jackson. He said, "When you get there come see me. I want to open up another restaurant, and maybe you'd like to do that with me." So they opened up, on the corner of Capitol and Farrish Street, the Palace Sandwich Shop. And then they closed that, and he opened one across the street in the block where the King Edward Hotel is on Capitol Street, and it was called the Tip-Top. He had that during the war. He started that one, I think in '33, '34, '35, somewhere in there. It was somewhere during the Depression. And families that he knew were out of work, didn't have money to buy food or anything, he would feed them and then he would write a ticket so that it wouldn't embarrass them. He had a cigar box, and he'd put that ticket in there, and he'd say, "When you get a job, come back and we'll figure how much you owe me." Well, when he died I went to clean the house out, and I found six cigar boxes full of those tickets.

Pam Jabour Mayfield's family in Vicksburg is a good example of the rapid rate of success and expansion some Lebanese were experiencing as storeowners.

My grandfather came, and he was a peddler up in the Delta. When he got enough money, he opened a store. The Kaleel Building is named after my grandfather. That was where

his business was, and my father's was next door. The Kaleel Building was on the corner, and my father's business was called the Hub, and it was next door. It was a dry goods store. And then he had other stores, and other brothers had men's clothing stores also. So, my uncle George Jabour had a store called the Toggery, and it was across the street. And then up the street my Uncle Karl opened. It was first called Jabour Brothers, because some of his brothers were helping him, and then when they went out on their own, doing what they wanted to do, it became Karl's. So, at one time, there was Karl's, the Hub, and the Toggery, and they were all three owned by Jabour boys. They were all selling clothes, but different kinds of clothes. Daddy used to say, "He's my competitor from nine to five, and he's my brother from five to nine."<sup>48</sup>

## Prejudice and Acceptance

It would seem that in a relatively short amount of time the Lebanese people had accomplished the American dream, and in a large sense, they had. But part of that dream was yet to be realized—the same part that blacks and Asian immigrant groups had yet to fully obtain: racial equality and acceptance by the dominant culture. "My mother used to tell us that we were not accepted fully as citizens really," said Pat Davis Sr. "The Lebanese were called names and, you know, looked down upon, but not like the African American people. We were able to go to the white schools. We were able to drink out of white fountains and go to the white restrooms."<sup>49</sup>

In the 1920s, the prevailing white attitude toward blacks was hostile, and the moderate racial tolerance that immigrants had experienced in the South before World War I was slowly

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<sup>48</sup> Pamela Jabour Mayfield, in discussion with the author, Vicksburg, Mississippi, October 14, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, April 6, 2007.

fading. After World War I, many white southerners began embracing a religious and ethnic nativism that fast turned into xenophobia, but immigrants still followed each other to the Mississippi *mahjar*, where many already had a support system of family and friends. It was a place where ugly racial epithets were thrown around freely, often aimed directly at the Lebanese whose dark skin and dark hair made them stand out.<sup>50</sup> “He got in a fight every day,” Mary Ann Lefoldt said about her father, “because he talked with a broken accent until the day he died when he was eighty-three. He had been here since he was ten. It’s just the way they talked. And my grandmother never figured out English. Well, I mean, she could talk, but you know she really—because she would talk English with Lebanese, with Arabic.”<sup>51</sup> “When my grandparents first came,” said Pam Mayfield when I asked her if she had ever heard stories of her family being treated with prejudice because of their ethnicity, “there was a place in Vicksburg, and my grandfather Jabour had to eat with the blacks. There was a black section and a white section. I just remember my daddy telling about it, but it was just the fact. It wasn’t that it was a problem. It was just a fact.”<sup>52</sup>

Sometimes, in interethnic marriages in Mississippi, prejudice could even be found in one’s own home. Teresa Nicholas, whose mother was a white southerner, openly related this story to me:

I never really was aware of it to be honest with you. I mean, there were a couple of things that occurred to me. My mother’s mother who was a very, well, there’s no other way to put it, she was kind of mean. But, you know, it was a meanness born of necessity because

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<sup>50</sup> Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 250–51.

<sup>51</sup> Lefoldt, October 13, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Mayfield, October 14, 2017.

they had lived such a hard life. She called me her “nigger grandchild.” And I thought when she did, I thought, “What is that all about?” She had never known anybody who looked like me, who was supposed to be white, and I had an olive complexion. I got really dark in the summer when we played outside all the time, and I think she was just flabbergasted by the color I turned every year. That really hurt my feelings. But at the same time it gave me great empathy for black people, which I think really helped me to understand how to react to the civil rights movement.<sup>53</sup>

Through my conversations I discovered that as a result of frequent harsh treatment of the Lebanese, immigrant-generation parents often discouraged outward display of ethnic difference, as Al Katool explained to me:

Back in those days, when I was growing up, they would not speak Arabic in front of us. The reason is they knew we were going to go to school and go out and all, and they didn’t want us speaking Arabic because of the prejudice, the Ku Klux Klan and all. So, they spoke very little Arabic, and what little Arabic I picked up I heard when they were conversing with each other. We all—the Italians, the Greeks, the Syrians, Lebanese, Irish was also, Jewish—and we all kind a lived in the same neighborhood. And our neighbors were black. So we all lived in the same area off Gallatin Street and all in that area. One of the wealthiest families, that was right across the street from my grandfather’s house, was a Bourgeois. They were Jewish and had a jewelry store, but we were all watching each other’s back all the time, but it was crosses burned in yards. I remember one— I didn’t

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<sup>53</sup> Teresa Nicholas, in discussion with the author, Jackson, Mississippi, January 5, 2018.



understand it. You know? But I can remember a cross being burned in the Bourgeois's yard.

“[W]e know what a hard time is”

Much discussion in the interviews for this project centered on the transition from ethnic foreigner to assimilated southerner. The narrators in this project remember the older generation being caught in a dilemma. Since they intended to make Mississippi their permanent home, they had to consider how they would assimilate into southern society. In the early decades of the twentieth century, whites and the Lebanese people in Mississippi rarely mixed socially, and assimilation into the dominant culture would be difficult for the newcomers, especially if they derived their main source of revenue through a fast association with the groups against which whites were most prejudiced. But they did not come from a culture of racial prejudice, and because of their experiences with oppression back home and in the new land, the Lebanese possessed a firsthand knowledge of discrimination, generally producing sympathetic understanding for the plight of blacks in the state. The Lebanese had maintained an amicable relationship with the black community. Chafik Chamoun of Clarksdale, who peddled, like his grandfather, explained the situation to me unambiguously:

I tell you, I made my living from the black people. It was special relationship between Lebanese and black community. It was better than any other place, because it was . . . I don't know how to put it . . . the Lebanese, they are honest people, and if you done me a favor I appreciate it, and I'll never forget it. And these black people, they bought from the

Lebanese people, the peddlers, they give them place to live, so no need for Lebanese people to resent them really. They were grateful to them. The people I was dealing with, doing business with, they were my friends. When I left the trade, I missed them. They were poor, they didn't have any money, but they never beat me. If they had a dollar or two, they spent it, but I was honest with them too. We were raised with no prejudice. I'm the same, everyone like that, but the majority of the Lebanese people, we know what a hard time is. When you know what [a] hard time is, you feel for somebody having [a] hard working time. These poor people used to work the country chopping cotton. I have a feeling for them. I think we need the black people and the black people need us. It was a business relation, and we look at them as a human being, not as a slave or as second-class citizen. We didn't look at them like that.<sup>54</sup>

Mary Ann Lefoldt made similar claims that carried over a generation later:

We were not taught to hate black people. That's how my father made his living, so he treated them just like he would treat anybody else. So, integration to me was not that big of a deal. I mean, in other words, it didn't bother me. I had four blacks, in 1967, in my graduating class at St. Joe.<sup>55</sup>

In a moving story, Pam Mayfield described an epiphanic moment she had when faced with the question of race:

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<sup>54</sup> Chamoun, April 6, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Lefoldt, October 13, 2017.

In 1975 I was called to be on a murder trial. The first thing they did was ask, “Do you agree to abide by the rules of the state of Mississippi, yes or no?” And the next one was, “Are you prejudiced?” And at that point, I was in my early thirties, and I had never been asked if I was prejudiced. I looked around and there were all these customers that my daddy had had forever. Some black and some are white, some were Hispanic. He started in 1933, so this is now ’75, ’76. It gave me time to think. Was I prejudiced? And I was not prejudiced, and I realized that my father—that was probably the nicest gift he ever gave me. And I didn’t realize it until 1975 that he had given me that gift.<sup>56</sup>

Stories gathered in this project provide evidence that the Lebanese were a more racially tolerant group, but despite the lack of evidence in my interviews that suggests the Lebanese were ever crusaders for a more racially just society, there existed a pervasive wariness on the part of the Lebanese, as Dan Nicholas, from Yazoo City, explains:

You know, the Lebanese were very wary of the Citizens Council and KKK and stuff like that, because if you could oppress one group of people you could oppress another group of people. I don’t know of any Lebanese that were white supremacist. I think they were just wanting to make a living. I don’t remember any n-word used or anything like that.

### The Process of Americanization

As early as the 1940s, the process of Americanization had begun to gain a stronghold on the American-born children of immigrant parents, and because of the relative prosperity that the

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<sup>56</sup> Mayfield, October 14, 2017.

group had begun to enjoy, Lebanese children and adults were becoming increasingly accepted into white society, but whites permitted the Lebanese to climb only so high up the social ladder. When the Lebanese community attempted to join traditionally white clubs or organizations, they quickly learned just how far they had—or had not—come. Although Lebanese were welcome at most churches and public events, many exclusive organizations that had always been strictly “for whites only” remained so, and although the color line was blurred, it remained drawn. For example, in colleges and universities across the state in the early 1960s, young Lebanese students found themselves barred from joining fraternities and sororities because of their Lebanese heritage. Fraternal organizations like the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lion’s clubs were no different, and until around 1960, most country clubs in the Delta still explicitly stipulated that Syrians and Lebanese be excluded from joining.

Ellis Antoon told me about his and his family’s experiences with exclusive social clubs in Mississippi:

Sometimes it was hard for the general public to accept Italians and Lebanese, and whatnot. I don’t know that I should bring this up or not, but as far as socializing, my cousin Ed Antoon had all the qualifications in the world. He had a law degree, was practicing law, he had come from a good family. The Antoon’s Department Store was coming up. That was his family. He tried to get in the country club and was not accepted. They wouldn’t accept him because of his ethnic background. And, you know, I went to college, and when you first go, your freshman year, you go through orientation, and all of my friends were being rushed by fraternities. Well, nobody spoke to me. Finally one fraternity decided they would go ahead and talk to me. So, anyway, to make a long story

short, I found out later that my ethnic background—both parents, both were both Syrian, or Lebanese—they did not accept that, and they did the same thing with the Italians.

Now, there were just certain fraternities or sororities that did that. But I had a cousin that ended up that way, and my next-door neighbor, who was Italian, ended up that way. They both got in a fraternity, but it wasn't the one that their financial background in—in community standing—represented.<sup>57</sup>

Dolores Ulmer found herself denied the social and cultural capital that sororities on the University of Mississippi campus provided in the 1960s:

I couldn't join certain sororities at Ole Miss. We were rejected, but I had a Greek friend, and she couldn't join either, and I thought something's matter with that picture. We went through rush, and I do remember this very well. After it was over, I took away the things I didn't want, and it ended up I did not get a bid. Well, when I went back to the dorm, I saw all of these people wailing and crying, and I asked somebody what was the matter, and they said because they didn't get in to what they wanted or they didn't get in one, and I thought, "Oh, my goodness, I'm suppose to be upset." But I had some friends that had gotten into some sororities, and they were actually two of them that were my best friends from Murrah. They took me aside, and they said, "Well, we knew that you weren't going to get into these sororities, but we just couldn't tell you." I just looked at them. They said, "We didn't want to hurt your feelings," and I thought, you know, if they had told me in

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<sup>57</sup> Ellis Antoon, November 10, 2017.

the first place I wouldn't have done this. But you know, you're young, hindsight, who cares? Just get a college degree.<sup>58</sup>

Exclusion was not without exception, of course. "Yeah, we went to the Cotillion Club," my father, James G. Thomas Sr., told me. "Was really big in the Delta. You had to be proud to get an invitation to go. And I got one every year. Two or three because they would have three or four dances. And the Delta different from— You've got Belzoni, Greenville, Leland, Cleveland, Indianola, Clarksdale, but we didn't go all the way to Clarksdale but once."<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Slowly, with each successive generation, the Lebanese became untethered from the marginalized middle, leaving behind the negative results of their otherness. Dolores Thomas Ulmer described a memory of her grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration that included a swath of Jackson society, a result of a broader social network:

I have a picture of them when they celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. It was a huge party at their home on Capitol Street. And Jitti and Grandma, knowing all the people that they did, people were laughing because there was the head Jewish church leader, there was the bishop of the Episcopal Church, and there was the bishop of the Catholic Church there at the same time. And all the politicians. It was interesting that everybody had a love for this family and this man, S. N., and his wife, and that they

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<sup>58</sup> Ulmer, January 5, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> James George Thomas Sr., in discussion with the author, Leland, Mississippi, November 11, 2017.

would all show up at the same time. I love that. And we were all dressed up, being host and hostesses to the city.<sup>60</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the white community began allowing certain Lebanese families and citizens to join their exclusive clubs and organizations. Lebanese/Anglo-American marriages had become more and more common and, in some places, accepted. After having lived in the Mississippi Delta for eighty years, the Lebanese were now more fully assimilating into the socially and economically dominant culture. This general acceptance as a distinct ethnic group ultimately came down to simple economics. As businesses grew, so did Lebanese dollars. As a result, over the next twenty years, the social change for the Lebanese in Mississippi was significant. By the mid-to-late decades of the twentieth century, the Lebanese were able to use their economic power to advance their social position in what was still a racially and economically divided Delta.

Despite their success in assimilating into the dominant southern culture, the Lebanese did succeed in preserving some sense of Lebanese identity, and effort that began early on. At the dinner table, Lebanese children gained a love and appreciation of Lebanese food, and in the kitchen they learned to make tabouleh, roll grape leaves, and bake kibbee. Naming patterns continued: the first-born son was often named after his father and the second son took the first names of his grandfathers, as evidenced by the number of juniors included in this project. At special events, such as weddings and baptisms, guests played traditional music with traditional instruments and danced traditional dances, such as the *dabke*, and Lebanese families maintained a vigorous religious life that reflected their Christian religious practices on the Mountain.

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<sup>60</sup> Ulmer, January 5, 2018.

Keith Fulcher, who has created the 1,325-member<sup>61</sup> Facebook page “El Mosif to Mississippi,” which connects Mississippians with Lebanese roots across the globe, described to me the importance of maintaining a connection to his Lebanese identity:

Nothing influenced us more than the food. Nothing. I give credit to the dinner table. My grandmother, as you talked about grape leaves—and I’ll cry because you miss your grandmother—but, man, those fingerprints in the mishees [cabbage rolls]. I was showing my daughter the other night. I said, “Now look, Marianna, see how I am squeezing it? You see those fingerprints? Man, whenever we ate mishees,” I said, “you could see Grandma Minnie’s fingerprints, and you just knew.” And so she came home the other day, and she said, “Daddy, I ate your fingerprints,” because she took mishees to school with her, you know? Just carrying on those family traditions. Why is it important? I don’t know why I think it is important my children know they are one quarter Lebanese. But they know it. Now when they have children and they are 12.5 percent Lebanese, I don’t know where it filters down, but I don’t want it to stop.<sup>62</sup>

Matthew Tonos, at twenty-four years old, the youngest participant in this study at the time of the interview, only recently began to regard his Lebanese ethnicity with real significance. When we sat down for this interview, he confided,

I was not aware of my Lebanese identity until I started really looking into it in college. I don’t really consider myself *Lebanese* Lebanese. I mean, I am, but I feel like we’re just

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<sup>61</sup> “El Monsif to Mississippi,” Facebook, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/monsiftomississippi/>.

<sup>62</sup> Fulcher, December 6, 2018.



an ordinary family with a certain few traditions or whatever. You know, I'm proud of it, for sure. I went so far as to study the language. I'd say it's important to me to be aware of it. I think we've got something unique in being Lebanese. Not unique as in, "Look at me. I'm special." But it's something— It's interesting, at least. And it's good to know about it, because a lot of our ancestors came out of persecution. They fought for us to be here, you know?<sup>63</sup>

"There are so many questions that I have now about my family and when they were growing up," Mary Tonos Brantley lamented to me. "When we were growing up and we started talking about their family, I invisibly put stoppers in my ears. Just because [*sighs*] it was a little bit embarrassing to be Lebanese when you were trying to be popular and cool and American. You didn't want to hear the stories. That's all they seemed to do was talk about the food and the stories. And so there are some bits and pieces that I wish I had asked about. I've just gotten a few answers to these, but I still have some questions."<sup>64</sup> Hopefully this project has asked some of those questions, and older generations have passed down the answers, the stories of our ancestors, and those stories become more meaningful with each telling. As this *Lebanese in Mississippi* oral history project tries to show, passion and pride in a Lebanese heritage has prevailed, and the history of the Lebanese past remains ingrained in the memory of Lebanese Mississippians.

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew Tonos, in discussion with the author, Oxford, Mississippi, October 5, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Brantley, November 24, 2017.

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## APPENDIX: THE NARRATORS



Interviews initiated with this project took place between October 5, 2017, and February 3, 2018.

I intend to continue interviewing for this project and to add to the online component. Biographies herein result of information gained through my interviews.

**Jim Richard Angelo** was born on October 6, 1943, in Vicksburg. His father was born in 1910 in Beaumont, Texas, to Lebanese immigrants who entered America either through New Orleans or through Galveston. His mother was born in El Munsif, Lebanon, in 1906, and immigrated with her parents, Abe Farris and Zelpha Farris, through the port at Ellis Island. The Farris family had preceded them to America and who were living in Meridian, Mississippi. They followed them there, later moving to Vicksburg.

Jim Angelo grew up in Vicksburg and lived there until he graduated from high school and left for college. He and his family had lived in a house behind the grocery store that his mother and father ran on Cherry Street. Angelo eventually returned to Mississippi, and he and his wife, Susie, live in Brandon today.

Growing up, Angelo, like most of the Lebanese community in Vicksburg, attended St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, where his parents were married. “I grew up in this church, grew up in Vicksburg,” he said, “and St. George is the only church I’ve ever had membership in my entire life. I was baptized [here], and I’ve always maintained membership here. This is it for me. It’s a small community, so you know the people here are by and large very dedicated. Good people and wonderful people in this church, I promise you. People care about each other.”

Jim and Susie participate in organizing and preparing the Lebanese Dinner at St. George, an annual event that began in 1959. Today the church serves around 3,500 Lebanese meals in one day.

My interview with Angelo took place in St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Vicksburg on Saturday, February 3, 2018.

**Ellis Paul Antoon** was born October 30, 1930. His father was born in the Syrian village of Dahr Safra near Baniyas, and his mother was born in New Rose, Louisiana, although her father was also from Dahr Safra. His grandparents on his mother's side met and married in Mississippi.

Once Antoon's father, Farris Asper Antoon, arrived in America, he, along with his brothers, peddled wares in towns and communities in Mississippi before his brothers settled in Greenwood and opened a clothing store, which became Antoon's Department Store. Ellis's father opened F. Antoon Grocery and Market on the corner of Gibbs and Howard Sts., and he ran the store for more than twenty years.

When Antoon was young he worked in his father's grocery store. His parents spoke Arabic in the home and sometimes in the store, "but mainly they tried to limit the talk to English, because they were living in the United States," Antoon remembered. The neighborhood where he lived was multiethnic, with other Syrian-Lebanese, Jews, and Italians living side by side, although Antoon's parents "didn't do a lot of socializing outside of the Syrian and Lebanese circle."

After graduating from Greenwood High School, Antoon spent twenty-one months in active duty in Korea during the Korean War and attended college at Mississippi State University,

transferring to the University of Alabama after two years in Starkville. He majored in business administration.

My interview with Ellis Antoon took place on November 10, 2017, in the home of Ellis and Jo Ann Antoon in Greenwood, Mississippi.

**Marie Antoon** was born in Clarksdale in 1954 to Asper Antoon (Ellis Antoon's brother) and Irma Antoon, née Houston. She lived in Greenwood for a short time as a small child, but then her family moved to Jackson, where she grew up, returning to Greenwood throughout childhood—as often as every other weekend—to visit Lebanese family there. Although not Lebanese, Marie's mother, Irma, “was a great Lebanese cook,” Marie recalls. “She was one of the best.”

Marie's father's mother's parents came to America around 1880, and once here they worked as peddlers. Her paternal grandfather, Farris Asper Antoon, came around 1916, immigrating through Ellis Island in New York. Shortly after he arrived in America, he married Rosemary Toubia, also Lebanese, in an arranged marriage. The Antoons migrated to Greenwood, Mississippi, and started a family, although Marie's father, Asper Antoon, was born in 1928 in El Dorado, Arkansas, where the family was living at the time. The Antoons eventually moved back to Greenwood.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the Antoons became a family of retail merchants, opening small corner grocery stores and Antoon's Department Store in Greenwood (ca. 1910), when the city was the fastest-growing town in the state. Antoon's Department Store stayed in business in the Antoon family on the corner of Carrollton and Main Sts. until 1995.

After attending Catholic and public schools in Jackson, Marie graduated high school and entered the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, studying communications. She

graduated in 1975. She went to work with Alabama Public Television in 1976 and then moved to Florida, where she also worked for a television station. She later returned to Mississippi, enrolling at the University of Mississippi, earning a master's degree in history and becoming the director of the university's Teleproductions Resource Center. In 2002, Antoon became the Mississippi Educational Broadcasting network's first female executive director. She retired from the position in 2009.

Today, Marie Antoon lives in Oxford with her husband, Charles Reagan Wilson.

My interview with Marie Antoon took place at Antoon's home in Oxford on November 10, 2017.

**Mary Tonos Brantley** lives in Jackson but grew up in Greenville attending St. Joseph Catholic Church and St. Joseph Catholic School. She recently retired from her longtime position as English instructor and chair of the English Department at Holmes Community College in Jackson.

Her maternal grandfather, Shakralla Sam Alracy, came to the United States from Syria, immigrating through El Paso in 1906, when he was thirteen years old. In 1915 he married Mary's grandmother Nazira Marie Hallal, who was born in New York City. Mary's mother's family "made their way to Coahoma County and settled in Clarksdale," she said, "and eventually moved the family to Shaw, Mississippi, where, to my knowledge, they were the only Lebanese people."

The immigration story of Mary's paternal grandfather, Mike Saliba Tonos, is less-well documented, but the family believes that he came to America with his mother, Martha, and her father's mother, Elmaz, and worked in a factory in Upstate New York until they could earn enough to travel to the Delta. They settled in Greenville and opened a grocery store. In fact, both

of Mary's grandfather's owned grocery stores, her mother's father also owning a dry goods store and a hotel.

Mary's parents' families were Catholic, which has traditionally been a common religion, if not the predominant faith, among Lebanese families in Mississippi. Her mother, Billie Rossie Tonos, taught school at St. Rose of Lima Academy—a predecessor to St. Joseph School—in Greenville, which was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy until the school was replaced by St. Joseph Catholic School in 1950. Mrs. Tonos taught for several decades thereafter.

As a way of maintaining and nurturing a Lebanese identity, Mary has been active in the Cedars of Lebanon Club in Jackson since around 2000. “The main way for me to embrace my culture as an adult has been through the Lebanese Club,” she said. Her parents were active in the club in Greenville, of which Dave Sherman was the longtime president.

Mary's brother is John Michael “Mike” Tonos, Jr., and Keith Fulcher was the principal of St. Joseph Junior High in Jackson when her son was a student there. Both Mike and Keith, along with Dave Sherman, are Lebanese in Mississippi research participants, and each of their oral histories are included in this study.

My interview with Mary Tonos Brantley took place in Oxford, Mississippi, on November 24, 2017.

**Chafik A. Chamoun** was born in 1932 to Abraham and Nazha Gattas Chamoun in Zahlé, Lebanon, in the Bekaa Valley. His grandfather Joe Gattis had come to America through Mexico around 1900, first living in and peddling around Brookhaven, Mississippi, and later settling in Clarksdale.

Until he was twenty-two, Chamoun had lived in Zahlé, where he and his family farmed wheat, corn, and watermelon and owned a vineyard, but in 1954 he and his wife, Louise, then seventeen, immigrated through New York Harbor to America—traveling down to Mississippi, where he still had family. Neither Chafik nor Louise spoke fluent English, but Chafik soon found work as a “Rawleigh Man,” selling household products door to door in the rural parts of Coahoma County for the W. T. Rawleigh Company. He did so for nineteen years.

In 1968 Chafik and Louise purchased a grocery store that they named Chamoun’s Grocery, where after some time, in order to compete with growing competition from supermarkets, he and Louise began selling lunches and sandwiches, including kibbee sandwiches.

In 1990 an opportunity arose for them to purchase Rest Haven, an American, Italian, and Lebanese restaurant that had been in the Joseph family—another local Lebanese family—for many years. In the tradition of Chamoun’s Grocery, Chafik and Louise included an expanding list of Lebanese food on the Rest Haven menu, including kibbee (raw, baked, and fried), cabbage rolls, grape leaves, tabouli, and pita bread. They returned to visit their former homeland about once a year until the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001.

Their daughter Paula took over the management of Rest Haven when her father was no longer able to manage the day-to-day operations of the restaurant. She continues to run Rest Haven today.

Chafik Chamoun passed away on December 8, 2017, and Louise Chamoun passed away on September 12, 2019. My interview with Chamoun took place at Chamoun’s Rest Haven Restaurant in Clarksdale, Mississippi, on April 6, 2007.

**Keith Fulcher** lives in Cleveland, Mississippi, but was born in Vicksburg in 1961. His paternal great-grandfather was John George Nohra. Nohra and his wife Mary Nassar arrived in New Orleans in 1892, residing on Royal St. and on Dumaine St. in the French Quarter. Nohra is listed as a peddler in the 1910 US Census, but he later worked at Solari's, a grocery store on Royal St. in New Orleans.

Fulcher's maternal great-grandparents were Mike George Farris and Helen Moses Farris, from El Musif, Syria. They arrived in the United States around 1900, entering the country through El Paso-Juarez, Mexico. His maternal grandfather was Toefel George "T.G." Nohra and his grandmother was Minnie Farris Nohra of Vicksburg.

Fulcher gained a deep appreciation of his Lebanese heritage from his grandmother, Minnie Farris, who encouraged him to embrace his Phoenician roots. Like so many other Lebanese men and women, Minnie Farris worked in a department store, the Charles Abraham Department Store on Washington St. in Vicksburg, for much of her working life. Inspired by the stories his grandmother Minnie told him as a child, Fulcher is today teaching his daughter Marianna to prepare and appreciate the history behind Lebanese foods.

On February 10, 2011, Carolyn Ellis Staton created the Facebook group El Monsif to Mississippi, designed for descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants who came to Mississippi from El Monsif, Syria. Today, Fulcher administrates the group, which has grown to 1,360 members from places across Mississippi to Ohio, Pennsylvania, Australia, Mexico, and England.

Following a twenty-three-year career at Delta State University in Cleveland as head of its alumni foundation, Keith is now the executive vice president of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi.

My interview with Keith Fulcher took place in Marks, Mississippi, on December 6, 2017.

**Alfred J. Katool, Sr.** was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on November 22, 1929. My interview with Mr. Katool took place on October 13, 2017, in the Cedars of Lebanon clubhouse at 143 Cedars of Lebanon Rd. in Jackson. Katool is the treasurer of the club, and he and his family have been members since it began in the mid-1930s.

This photo was taken in the front yard of the Cedars of Lebanon clubhouse in Jackson. Katool said that a club member brought the cedar tree that stands behind him from Lebanon during the first years of the club's existence.

Mr. Katool still lives in Jackson, Mississippi.

My interview with Al Katool took place at the Cedars of Lebanon clubhouse in Jackson, Mississippi, on October 13, 2017.

**Mary Anne Rice Lefoldt** was born in 1949 in Jackson, Mississippi. Her mother was born in 1914 in Tyler, Texas. Her maternal grandparents Charlie and Comana Unis came from Syria through Galveston to Tyler around 1913 or 1914.

Her father was born in 1910 in Hemlaya, in the Mount Lebanon region of Syria. He immigrated through Rhode Island to the US in 1920. He and his family went first to Detroit, Michigan, then south to Jackson because her grandmother Yesmine disliked Detroit and had relatives in Mississippi.

Once in Mississippi, Mary Anne's grandfather and father peddled. Eventually, like so many other Lebanese in the state, they opened and ran grocery stores. Her father's were on Lynch St., Pascagoula St., and Farrish St. in Jackson. Despite moving to the US when he was ten



years old, and living into his eighties, her father “talked with a broken accent until the day he died,” Mary Anne recalled.

Her mother and father met at the first Lebanese convention in Jackson in 1935 and were married in 1936. Her grandparents, Yesmine and George Ryas, were charter members of the club, and Mary Anne remains a member today.

Mary Anne learned to cook Lebanese food from her grandmother and her mother, who cooked Sunday dinners for the family until she was around ninety-six years old. In the audio on this page, Mary Anne talks about going to the Cedars of Lebanon Club as a child and learning to do traditional Lebanese dances, like the dabke, to traditional Lebanese music.

She also remembers her family being denied membership to the country club and the Junior League in Jackson—organizations that have traditionally lent themselves to social and economic advancement—as a result of their Lebanese ethnicity and Catholic religion.

Mary Anne and her husband, Larry, have three daughters who go to the Cedars of Lebanon Club occasionally. “They appreciate their heritage,” Mary said, “and they always tell everybody they are Lebanese.”

My interview with Mary Anne Lefoldt took place at the Cedars of Lebanon clubhouse in Jackson on Friday, October 13, 2017.

**Pam Mayfield** was born on December 4, 1946, in Vicksburg, Mississippi. All of her grandparents were born in the Mount Lebanon region of Syria, immigrating to the United States through various points, including through Ellis Island in New York, and into Texas via Mexico. Some of her family remained in Texas, others pressed on into Mississippi, and others turned south and settled in South America.

Her paternal grandfather peddled “clothes and thread and fabric,” Pam said, eventually opening a dry goods store in downtown Vicksburg. Her father and his brothers later each owned their own men’s clothing stores in Vicksburg, all within close proximity to one another, named the Hub, the Toggery, Jabour Brothers, and Karl’s.

Pam’s parents, Mike Jabour and Azizie Thomas Jabour, met at a Cedars of Lebanon Ladies Club New Years Eve party in Vicksburg. Both of her parents, and Pam herself, were active in St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church. Her mother was a member of the Ladies of St. George and was one of the founders of the Lebanese Dinner, an annual St. George fundraiser, which is in its sixtieth year in 2020.

As a child and teenager, Pam attended Bowmar Avenue Elementary School, Carr Junior High School, and H. V. Cooper High School, all in Vicksburg, and later attended Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, and the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

After graduating from the University of Mississippi in 1969, Pam moved to Clarksdale, in the Mississippi Delta, to teach at Coahoma County Junior College. It was there that she met Jerry Mayfield, from Marks, Mississippi. They married in 1970 and moved to Marks, where she taught at County Day School (today called Delta Academy). Pam and Jerry later relocated to Vicksburg, where Pam, after having worked in her father’s clothing store for some time, opened a store of her own—a women’s clothing store above the Hub, called Top of the Hub.

Pam and her daughter, Courtney, live in Vicksburg.

My interview with Pam Mayfield took place at the home of Pam Mayfield in Vicksburg, Mississippi, on October 14, 2017.

**Dan Nicholas** was born in Yazoo City in 1945 to Dan Nicholas and Marie Nicholas, neé Joseph. His grandparents immigrated to Mississippi at the turn of the century. Like many early Lebanese newcomers to the state, his paternal grandfather first worked as a peddler, traveling along the Mississippi River in central Mississippi, eventually settling in Yazoo City. His maternal grandfather, Ellis Joseph, lived in Jackson and owned a fruit stand. He later began a wholesale fruit company called A. Joseph and Co.

In Yazoo City, Dan Nicholas and his family enjoyed the company of other Lebanese families, such as the Ellis and Moses families, who owned businesses on Broadway and Mound Sts. In his interview for this project, Nicholas recalled that his grandfather owned a “general mercantile store” and the family lived in an apartment above it.

Nicholas’s father later “ended up in the automobile business and the restaurant business,” where his mother cooked and included Lebanese dishes, like kibbee and cabbage rolls, on the menu, alongside southern fare. They owned the restaurant, Danrei’s, on Main St., from around 1953 to around 1974.

As is often the case, food is one way that the Nicholas family maintains Lebanese traditions into the twenty-first century. Dan’s aunt, Margie Joseph Weber, taught his non-Lebanese wife, Beth, how to cook Lebanese food, and their daughter and daughter-in-law are both learning to cook it. “I think the food seems to be the most important thing,” he said.

Dan and Beth Nicholas now live in Ridgeland, which is between Jackson and Yazoo City.

My interview with Dan Nicholas took place in the home of Dan and Beth Nicholas on February 3, 2018.

**Teresa Avila Nicholas** was born in 1954 and raised in Yazoo City, Mississippi. Her great-grandfather George Nicholas, was from the Mount Lebanon region of Syria but traveled to America just before the turn of the century to work as a peddling merchant in New York. His work led him to follow trade routes up and down the Mississippi River, and he ended up in Vicksburg for a time before moving to Yazoo City, where he and other Lebanese families settled, including the Thomas, Alias, Joseph, and Weber families.

George married and with his new wife, Rosa Weber Nicholas, returned to Mount Lebanon for four years, during which they had three children, Solomon, Holloman, and Mary. They returned to Yazoo City in 1904 and opened a dry goods store.

George's son Solomon was Teresa's grandfather, and he married the non-Lebanese sharecropping Mississippian Vasti Nicholas. They owned a grocery store on West Broadway St. in Yazoo City, Nicholas Cash Grocery (pictured below). Above the grocery was a rooming house, the Nicholas Hotel. Teresa's uncle, Dan Nicholas, owned a successful car dealership in Yazoo City, and Teresa's father, Solomon Jr., worked keeping the books for Dan.

During the middle years of the twentieth century, some Lebanese Mississippians aligned with members of the segregationist white community, and Teresa's father was one of them, despite being part of an immigrant community whom those groups could easily turn against. Teresa pushed back against that kind of thinking early on, though, particularly since she had experienced prejudice from her own white, Southern Baptist grandmother. She had even witnessed a cross being burned at her Catholic school in Yazoo City, St. Clara's Academy. "I think it really helped me understand how to react to the civil rights movement," she says in our interview.

After high school, Teresa left Mississippi to attend Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. After, she married Gerard Helferich and lived and worked in publishing in New York City for twenty-five years. Over the years, she and Gerard began spending more and more time in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, eventually moving there. It was in Mérida, Mexico, that Teresa met her Mexican Lebanese relatives, people who were kin to her great-grandmother's family. "And guess what they did for a living?" she asks. "They owned grocery stores. They looked Lebanese, they sounded Lebanese, they ate Lebanese food, they did the things Lebanese did in terms of business."

Teresa has since returned to Mississippi, living in Jackson with Gerard. In 2011 she published a memoir, *Buryin' Daddy: Putting My Lebanese, Catholic, Southern Baptist Childhood to Rest*. She remains in touch with her Mexican-Lebanese family.

My interview with Teresa Nicholas took place in her home in Jackson on January 5, 2018.

**Mary Louise Nosser** was born on October 26, 1930, in Vicksburg, where she lived until her death. Her father came to America in 1920 from Sheikhan, Syria, in 1920 with "about fifty-five cents in his pocket," she said. Her mother arrived in Mississippi shortly thereafter from the village of Bekhaz. Both immigrated through New York's Ellis Island, making their way to Mississippi to join family who had come over before them.

For fifty-six years, Mary Louise had participated in the annual Lebanese Dinner held at the St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church in Vicksburg, preparing cabbage rolls, kouby, and tabouli to share with Lebanese and non-Lebanese families alike. "We've had people from all over the state of Mississippi coming to the dinner," she said.

In addition to the pleasure she took in sharing Lebanese traditions, Mary Louise had long been proud to talk about her home state. For thirteen years she volunteered as a guide at the Vicksburg National Military Park, and for twenty-four years Mary Louise volunteered as a docent at the Governor's Mansion in Jackson. She had been to the "old country" to visit relatives twice.

My interview with Mary Louise Nosser took place in her home in Vicksburg, Mississippi, on October 14, 2017. She passed away on March 9, 2019.

**Dave Sherman** was born in Greenville, Mississippi, on November 21, 1925. Both his father, Deeb Yousef Behada Charmoun, and his mother, Affifi Khalil Abdallah, were born in the Mount Lebanon region of Ottoman Syria. Mr. Sherman remembers his father's stories of immigrating to the United States in 1903 from Beirut, at the age of 18, by way of Mexico. He had left the Mountain as a result of the oppressive nature of Turkish occupation there. Arriving in America, immigration officials changed his name from Charmoun to Sherman, as was common practice. Mr. Sherman's mother arrived in the U.S. in 1904 by way of Ellis Island, and the two were married in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1908.

In 1909 Mr. Sherman's parents moved to Lake Village, Arkansas. His father peddled, travelling to small towns across the Arkansas Delta selling his wares, such as bedspreads, bed sheets, undergarments, women's hose, shoestrings, and other household goods. By 1913 Mr. Sherman's parents had moved to Greenville, Mississippi, and opened a grocery store at 415 Cleveland St., which the Great 1927 Mississippi River Flood destroyed. They opened a new store on Washington Ave. that sold general merchandise, such as shoes, boots, and dresses, in addition to groceries. The growing family lived in the house next door to the store.

As a youth, Mr. Sherman attended E. E. Bass School and Greenville High School, later working at Virden Lumber Company, then as a partner in his father's grocery store, eventually opening Greenville Lumber Company in the mid-1950s, which he ran until 2004. Dave Sherman and his wife Sara Sarullo Sherman moved to Oxford in 2005 or 2006, and he still lives there today, attending St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, which counts a number of Lebanese Oxonians among its congregants and even hosts a regular Lebanese dinner of grape leaves, kibbee, and other Lebanese foods. He is pictured above grinding the meat to make kibbee in 2017.

My interview with Dave Sherman took place in his home in Oxford, Mississippi, on December 12, 2017.

**Gloria Shamoun Thomas** (b. 1944) and her brother **Charles David Shamoun, Jr.** (b. 1946) were born in Greenville to Charles David Shamoun (b. 1904) and Rosie Shawa Shamoun (b. 1912). Their mother, Rosie Showah Shamoun, immigrated to America with her mother and father, when she was one year old. Like many others, the Showah family, including Rosie's aunt and uncle, intended to enter the U.S. through New York's Ellis Island. Once they arrived, though, Rosie's uncle was discovered to have an eye infection and was denied entry. "They didn't know at that time where they went, so she they never saw her again. That always just bothered my grandmother so bad," remembered Gloria. "I can remember her crying because she never got to see her sister again. They found out later they were in Brazil. Years later they found that out." The Showahs followed relatives to the Mississippi Delta town of Leland.

When Rosie was six, her grandfather died of influenza in the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. Grandmother remarried another Lebanese man, Joe Shamoun. "When [our mother] grew up they

didn't associate with anybody but Lebanese people. That's all her mother and daddy knew, you know, was Lebanese people."

The Shamouns owned a grocery store on Greenville's Nelson Street, on which a number of Lebanese families—including family friends, the Thomases, owned stores. When Gloria and Charles were both still small children, the family moved to Old Leland Road in Greenville and opened a small store in a shotgun house. Charles remembers working in the store as a boy: "I was three years old and I had my own cash register. I sat on I stood on a milk crate. I had my own cash register, and the penny button and the nickel button were wore out. Candy was a nickel, chips was a nickel, Cokes was a nickel."

But grocery shopping wasn't the only activity in the store. Customers could try their luck on slot machines, and there was even a jukebox in the store. "Every Saturday night we'd have people in the neighborhood come play music in there, and we'd have a little dance." Charles Sr. later closed the small grocery store and opened Shamoun's Cardinal Food Store nearby.

Gloria and Charles both attended St. Joseph School and St. Joseph Catholic Church in Greenville. Gloria continued her education at Mississippi College for Women in Columbus, and Charles attended the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. After college, Gloria moved to Atlanta and taught school for four years before returning to the Delta, marrying Robert Thomas, the brother of James George "T" Thomas, and becoming an elementary school teacher there. Charles continued in his father's footsteps, owning and operating a grocery store, Leland Food Market.

Today, Gloria lives in Leland, and Charles lives in Greenville.

My interview with Gloria Thomas and Charles Shamoun took place in the home of Gloria Thomas in Leland, Mississippi, on November 11, 2017.



**James George Thomas Sr.** (known as “T” to his friends) was born on April 23, 1940, in Leland, Mississippi. His father was Sam Thomas, originally of Greenville (born in Bishmazzine, Lebanon), and his mother was Victoria Mary Ellis Thomas, originally of Jackson and Port Gibson.

His parents first lived in Greenville, where Sam immigrated to as a young man. Sam’s father, Abu Anees Mafrij (the spelling varies, depending on the source), first came to the Delta from Bishmezzine around 1911 to begin peddling around the Greenville area. Just before World War I broke, Sam’s father returned to Bishmezzine to gather his family and bring them to Greenville. Abu Anees understood what the ramifications of the deteriorating political situation occurring in Syria would mean for his family, and he decided his move to Mississippi would be permanent. Thus, Abu Anees resolved to take on not only a new homeplace but a new name to accompany it. Thomas (or a variation of it) was the name of a Mafrij family elder, and he thought it would be a suitable one for his family. Once he returned to the States, his family’s last name would henceforth be Thomas, and he would be known as George.

In Greenville, George and his sons opened a grocery store on Nelson Street. By 1927 the grocery store had become established and had flourished into a successful business, but when the levees broke on the Mississippi during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the store was flooded to the roof. The eldest Thomas son moved to Vicksburg with his wife, but the rest of the Thomas family remained in Greenville and reopened grocery stores and dry goods stores. Many of the decedents of Abu Anees still live in Greenville, with others making up a large portion of the Lebanese population in nearby Leland.

George Thomas's grandson, James George Thomas, Sr. was raised in Leland, attended Leland public schools, and went to Mississippi Southern College (the University of Southern Mississippi). He was a lifetime member of the Leland United Methodist Church.

Thomas is the father of this project's author, James G. Thomas, Jr. This interview with my father took place on November 11, 2017, at 615 E. 3rd St. in Leland, in the house in which he was born and raised.

**John Michael "Mike" Tonos** was born on August 3, 1952. Today he lives in Oxford but grew up in Greenville attending St. Joseph Catholic Church and St. Joseph Catholic School.

His maternal grandfather, Shakralla Sam Alracy, came to the United States from Syria, immigrating through El Paso in 1906, when he was thirteen years old. In 1915 he married Mike's grandmother Nazira Marie Hallal, who was born in New York City. Mike's mother's family made their way to Coahoma County and settled in Clarksdale, and eventually moved the family to Shaw, Mississippi.

The immigration story of Mike's paternal grandfather, Mike Saliba Tonos, is less-well documented, but the family believes that he came to America with his mother, Martha, and her father's mother, Elmaz, and worked in a factory in Upstate New York until they could earn enough to travel to the Delta. They settled in Greenville and opened a grocery store. In fact, both of Mike's grandfather's owned grocery stores, his mother's father also owning a dry goods store and a hotel.

As a child, and into his teens, Mike worked in his father's small neighborhood grocery store, Tonos Grocery, in Greenville. "We sold beer, cigarettes, and Coke in a bottle," he recalled. "Dry goods, and Daddy was a butcher, so he cut meat."

Both sets of his grandparents were “distinctly Lebanese,” Mike said. The farther time took the Tonoses away from Mount Lebanon, though, the less distinctly Lebanese the family remained. “There was some Arabic spoken in [my grandparents’] houses, but my daddy’s generation were assimilated, and so they would speak mostly English. They could understand some of it, but they didn’t walk around the house speaking Arabic.”

There are ways, however, in which the Tonoses have held onto their Lebanese identity. Mike’s parents’ families were Catholic, which has traditionally been a common religion, if not the predominant faith, among Lebanese families in Mississippi. His mother, Billie Rossie Tonos, taught school at St. Rose of Lima Academy—a predecessor to St. Joseph School—in Greenville, which was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy until the school was replaced by St. Joseph Catholic School in 1950. Mrs. Tonos taught for several decades thereafter.

Working in communications for more than forty years now, Mike has served as executive editor of the *Sun Herald* in Biloxi-Gulfport and managing editor at the *Sun Herald*, the *Vicksburg Post*, and the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* in Tupelo. He now teaches in the Department of Journalism at the University of Mississippi. Mike’s sister is Mary Tonos Brantley and his son is Matthew Tonos. Both of their oral histories are also included in this study.

My interview with Mike Tonos took place on the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford on December 6, 2017.

**Matthew Tonos** was born in 1993 and grew up in Gulfport, moving to Tupelo with his family in 2004. His father, Michael Joseph Tonos, also included in this study, was raised in Greenville, where members of the Tonos family still exist. Matthew’s non-Lebanese mother is originally

from Akron, Ohio, but she has helped carry on Lebanese traditions in the Tonos home by having learned to cook Lebanese food from her mother-in-law.

In his interview, Matthew recalls traveling to Greenville from Gulfport as a child, especially during Christmastime, to visit family. “It was like Little Lebanon to me,” he said. “It seemed like just about everyone we met there were Lebanese. It was a big Lebanese community.” The Sherman family, which includes Dave Sherman, also included in this project, was one family he remembers in particular. “We always saw them, and they were basically considered family at the time.”

Matthew remembers being only one of two Lebanese children in Tupelo, but he went on to reinforce his sense of ethnic identity when he enrolled in Arabic and Middle Eastern history classes as a student at the University of Mississippi. While working in those programs he spent two months in Jordan, the closest the Study Abroad program went to Lebanon. Studying the Arabic language and the Middle East was “one of the ways I tried to connect with my family’s past, my ancestors,” he said. “I’d say it’s important to me to be aware of it. I think we’ve got something unique in being Lebanese.”

My interview with Matthew Tonos took place on October 5, 2017, on the University of Mississippi campus. He lives in Oxford with his wife and child.

**Dolores Thomas Ulmer** was born in 1947 in Jackson, Mississippi, to Edward and Victoria Thomas, née Joseph. Edward’s father, Sawaya Norman (S.N.) Thomas, was born in 1880 and came to America with his mother from Shweir, Syria, in 1894. S.N. first peddled wares around New York state but, as Dolores recounts in her interview, after the accidental death of his mother in 1896, S.N. relocated to Jackson, Mississippi, to work with a cousin selling dry goods. S.N.

became a shrewd businessman, opening a series of retail and wholesale businesses that eventually grew into S.N. Thomas' Sons Wholesale, a prosperous family-owned wholesale distribution business.

Dolores grew up in Jackson, attending St. Mary Catholic School, St. Richard Catholic School, St. Joseph High School, and graduating from Murrah High School. She taught second grade at St. Richard after graduating with a degree in education from the University of Mississippi in 1968. While at the university, Dolores sang in the choir with the University Singers. Her experience with music during her college years was not limited to the Ole Miss campus, though. "While I was there I saw an announcement on the bulletin board," she recalled. "They were hunting for a girl singer in a rock 'n' roll band. I called the number and tried out, and so I went on the road with the rock 'n' roll band, just on the weekends, and we traveled the Southeast." The band was the Royal American Showmen, and Dolores was the lead singer.

Her mother's family, the Josephs, belonged to the Cedars of Lebanon Club in Jackson and attended Lebanese conventions, organized by the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs, across the Southeast, and many of the Josephs remain active in those organizations. Dolores and her daughter Mary Miller have attended Lebanese conventions together in both Jackson and Memphis.

Dolores lives in Jackson with her husband, Curt Ulmer. Mary is a writer and lives in Oxford. Her latest book is *Biloxi: A Novel*.

My interview with Dolores Ulmer took place at Ulmer's home in Jackson on January 5, 2018. Her daughter Mary was present and participated in the interview.

**Louise Abraham Wilson** was born on January 16, 1922, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Her father, Sam Abraham, from the town of El Munsif, Syria, first joined his brother Mike Abraham in Hermanville, Mississippi, in 1891. Her father became a US citizen in 1903 and returned to Syria in 1904, bringing Louise's mother, Julia, and their children back to Mississippi in 1910.

Louise's family moved to Clarksdale before she was born. Once they had made the move to this small Delta town, Sam Abraham opened a grocery store in the Riverton neighborhood, where they and other Lebanese families lived. In that store "Poppa used to read mail in Arabic for Lebanese people who couldn't read English," she recalled. "They would bring their mail to the store, and he would read it for them." There at Abraham Grocery her father "would have extra help on Saturdays. He would take people home because they didn't have cars," she said. "Sometimes he wouldn't charge them if they bought a lot of groceries, but he would have someone take them home."

When Louise was a child, the youngest of three boys and six girls, the Abraham family primarily socialized with other Lebanese families, such as the Rossi, Shamoun, and Tonos families. "Lebanese used to visit all the time," she remembered. "Played cards." Lebanese men played a lot of poker, but the women mostly played bridge and Rook, another then-popular card game. In the springtime and summers, especially on July Fourth, Lebanese families gathered together outdoors: "They would take us to Moon Lake and have a picnic," and both Lebanese and southern food was always on the menu. "Everybody brought food, and they just made a big day of it."

At home, Abraham women made traditional Lebanese foods, including laban (a homemade yogurt), baklawa dessert pastry, sesame candy with figs and dates, and Syrian bread. Of course, there was always kibbie on Sundays. "Although we'd make kibbie everyday really,

we always had it on Sunday,” Louise said. But it wasn’t just the Lebanese women in the household who cooked for the family. “We always had a maid, because Mama helped Daddy in the store,” she recalled. “So we did have good food American style, but then we always had the kibbie and stuff. Lula helped my grandmother, and she knew how to cook everything because she was there all day.” As a result, African American women in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century learned to cook Middle Eastern dishes, and Lebanese women learned to cook southern food.

Louise, known as “We-z” to her friends, later married Frank Wilson, a non-Lebanese man, whose father was part owner in Delta Packing Company, where Louise was working at the time. “He was American, he was. But he loved the Lebanese people.” Louise and Frank’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren called him Papa, but for Louise they used the traditional word for grandmother: Sitti.

My interview with Louise Wilson took place in her home in Clarksdale, Mississippi on February 2, 2018. Mrs. Wilson’s niece, Georgia Abraham Wilson, was also present for the interview and can be heard in the following audio selections. The photo (above) is courtesy John Bobo, Louise Wilson’s great-nephew.

Louise Abraham Wilson passed away on May 2, 2019.

## VITA

**James G. Thomas, Jr.**

Associate Director

Center for the Study of Southern Culture

University of Mississippi

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### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

#### **July 2011–Present**

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PUBLICATIONS / Center for the Study of Southern Culture,  
University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

#### **June 2004–July 2011**

PUBLICATIONS EDITOR / Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of  
Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

#### **May 2003–June 2004**

PROJECT MANAGER / Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi,  
Oxford, Miss.

Edits and oversees the production of academic publications (such as the Faulkner and  
Yoknapatawpha Series, the twenty-four-volume *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, and *The*



*Mississippi Encyclopedia*), collections, newsmagazine (the *Southern Register*), online journal (*Study the South*), the *Mississippi Encyclopedia Online*, and related materials; determines and edits content for publications; develops contacts with authors across publication; assigns scholarly articles and secures contracts; works with university presses, websites, and other media; handles rights issues; provides supervision and guidance to support personnel; and serves as liaison and spokesperson for the Center across campus and beyond.

Plans, promotes, and implements the annual Oxford Conference for the Book (OCB) (since 2015), and co-creator and director of the annual Mississippi Delta Cultural Tour (2003–14). Oversees the marketing activities related to the OCB, and develops budget and monitors expenditures. Solicits funding from donations and grant sources to support the conference. Develops grant proposals and administers grant activities and reporting.

Supervises and directs the work of subordinate Center staff and graduate assistants.

### **August 2008–Present**

ADJUNCT INSTRUCTOR OF COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC / Department of Writing and Rhetoric, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

Writing instructor for the Center for Writing and Rhetoric. Teach two 18-student sections of Southern Studies-themed Liberal Arts 102 (or 23-student sections of ENGL 101 and ENGL 102) each semester. Member of Liberal Arts 102 Curriculum Committee, organized to assess and redirect core course outcomes and curriculum (committee chairman, 2010–18).

**August 2009–2014**

PRODUCER / Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Media & Documentary Projects,  
University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

Co-creator of *Sounds of the South*, a radio program based on entries from *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, aired on Mississippi Public Radio.

**August 2002–May 2003**

COPY EDITOR / *GUIDEPOSTS* magazine, New York, N.Y.

Responsible for editing copy by checking grammar, punctuation, sense and style for a monthly national magazine with a total circulation of over 12,000,000. Also responsible for ghostwriting feature stories and departments; writing captions, headlines and decks; researching and typesetting stories; and implementing editors' changes and corrections. Other responsibilities included working closely with the art department and printer.

**February 2000–August 2002**

COPY EDITOR / *ANGELS ON EARTH*, A *GUIDEPOSTS* publication, New York, N.Y.

Responsible for editing copy by checking grammar, punctuation, sense, and style for a bimonthly national magazine with a circulation of 750,000. Also responsible for ghostwriting features and departments; writing captions, headlines, and decks; researching and typesetting stories; and implementing editors' changes and corrections. Other responsibilities included managing departments editors, staff editors, contributing editors, and research department by overseeing all aspects of production from beginning to end.

**January 1999–December 1999**

EDITOR / *OXFORD TOWN*, Oxford, Miss.

**May 1998–January 1999**

MANAGING EDITOR / *OXFORD TOWN*, Oxford, Miss.

**March 1998–May 1998**

ASSISTANT EDITOR / *OXFORD TOWN*, Oxford, Miss.

Responsible for coordinating, assigning, and writing stories and articles for weekly arts and entertainment magazine with circulation of 7,500. Also responsible for copyediting, photography, layout, proofreading, arranging and conducting interviews with authors, musicians, and artists. Managed staff of usually eight or more.

**EDUCATION**

University of Mississippi, December 2007

Master of Arts, Southern Studies

University of Mississippi, May 1994

Bachelor of Arts, English and philosophy

**RECENT PUBLICATIONS**

**Books:**

James G. Thomas, Jr., ed., *Conversations with Lewis Nordan*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming.

- James G. Thomas, Jr., and Jay Watson, eds., *Faulkner and Slavery: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2018, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., and Jay Watson, eds., *Faulkner and Money: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2017, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., Darren Grem, and Ted Ownby, eds., *Southern Religion, Southern Culture: Essays Honoring Charles Reagan Wilson*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., Jay Watson, and Annette Trefzer, eds., *Faulkner and the Native South: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2016, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., associate ed., *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, ed. Ted Ownby and Charles Reagan Wilson, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., Jay Watson, and Jaime Harker, eds., *Faulkner and Print Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2015, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.
- James G. Thomas, Jr. and Jay Watson, eds., *Faulkner and History: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2014, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.
- James G. Thomas, Jr. and Jay Watson, eds., *Faulkner and the Black Literatures of the Americas: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2013, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., ed., *Conversations with Barry Hannah*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- James G. Thomas, Jr., managing ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson, 24 vols. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006–13. Print.

James G. Thomas, Jr. and Charles Reagan Wilson, vol. eds., *Science and Medicine. The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. 24 vols. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Print.

### **Book Chapters and Special Sections:**

“Mississippi *Mahjar*: The Lebanese Immigration Experience in the Mississippi Delta,” in *Ethnic Heritage of Mississippi*. Ed. Shana Walton. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi (2012).

Literary Co-Editor, *Square Table: The Yoknapatawpha Arts Council Cookbook* (2006)  
(National Second Place Winner of the 17th Annual Tabasco Community Cookbook Awards)

### **Online Journals:**

Editor, *Study the South* (2014–)

### **Online Encyclopedia:**

Editor, *Mississippi Encyclopedia* (2018–)

### **Journals and Periodicals:**

Guest ed., special issue on Gov. William Winter. *Southern Quarterly*. 54:1 (Fall 2016). Print.

“An Interview with Maude Clay Schuyler.” *Southern Quarterly*. 52:2 (Winter 2015). 123–36.  
Print.

“Mississippi *Mahjar*: Lebanese Immigration to the Mississippi Delta.” *Southern Cultures*.

Winter 2013. 35–54. Print.

*Living Blues*. Issue #210, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2010.

“Literary Mississippi.” *Northwest Airlines WorldTraveler*. March 2008. 86–87.

“Six Thousand Watts of Power,” *Delta Magazine*, September/October 2007.

*Delta Magazine*, July/August 2007 (photography).

Numerous reviews of fiction, nonfiction, and scholarly books in the *Oxford Town* and the

*Southern Register*, as well as interviews with literary figures such as Robert Stone, Tim

O’Brien, and Elmore Leonard.

Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, May 12, 2004

### **Encyclopedia Entries:**

“Franklin, Tom.” *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Ed. Ted Ownby and Charles Reagan Wilson.

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. Print.

“Patton, Charley.” *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Ed. Ted Ownby and Charles Reagan Wilson.

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. Print.

“Johnson, Tommy.” *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Ed. Ted Ownby and Charles Reagan

Wilson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. Print.

“Slave Revolts.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol.

19. *Violence*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 162–165.

Print. 24 vols.

“*The Defiant Ones.*” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson.

Vol. 18. *Media*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 231–232.

Print. 24 vols.

“Ali, Muhammad.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson.

Vol. 16. *Sports & Recreation*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press,

2010. 250–252. Print. 24 vols.

“Big Bend National Park.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan

Wilson. Vol. 16. *Sports & Recreation*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina

Press, 2010. 260–262. Print. 24 vols.

“Disney World.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol.

16. *Sports & Recreation*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

278–280. Print. 24 vols.

“Mammoth Cave National Park.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles

Reagan Wilson. Vol. 16. *Sports & Recreation*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North

Carolina Press, 2010. 316–319. Print. 24 vols.

“Ali, Muhammad.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson.

Vol. 13. *Gender*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 291–293.

Print. 24 vols.

“Richards, Ann.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol.

13. *Gender*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 344–346. Print.

24 vols.

“Cash, Johnny.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 200–202. Print. 24 vols.

“Franklin, Aretha.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 231–232. Print. 24 vols.

“Guthrie, Woody.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 240–242. Print. 24 vols.

“Harris, Emmylou.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 243–244. Print. 24 vols.

“Johnson, Tommy.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 262–263. Print. 24 vols.

“Patton, Charley.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 12. *Music*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 318–320. Print. 24 vols.

“Fulbright, J. William.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 10. *Law & Politics*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 337–338. Print. 24 vols.



- “Johnson, Andrew.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 10. *Law & Politics*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 354–355. Print. 24 vols.
- “Richards, Ann.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 10. *Law & Politics*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 382–384. Print. 24 vols.
- “Taylor, Zachery.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 10. *Law & Politics*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 394–396. Print. 24 vols.
- “Bragg, Rick.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 195–196. Print. 24 vols.
- “Franklin, Tom.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 273–275. Print. 24 vols.
- “Henley, Beth.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 317–318. Print. 24 vols.
- “Lee, Harper.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 347–348. Print. 24 vols.

- “Scott, Evelyn.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 411–412. Print. 24 vols.
- “Toole, John Kennedy.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 446–448. Print. 24 vols.
- “Yarborough, Steve.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 9. *Literature*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 475–476. Print. 24 vols.
- “Birds and Birding.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 8. *Environment*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 36–38. Print. 24 vols.
- “Big Bend National Park.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 8. *Environment*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 194–196. Print. 24 vols.
- “Guadalupe Mountains National Park.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 8. *Environment*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 223–225. Print. 24 vols.
- “Mammoth Cave National Park.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 8. *Environment*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 236–239. Print. 24 vols.

“Aunt Jemima.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 7. *Foodways*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 109–110. Print. 24 vols.

“Crawfish.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 7. *Foodways*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 109–110. Print. 24 vols.

“Slave Revolts.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 3. *History*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 239–242. Print. 24 vols.

“Johnson, Andrew.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson. Vol. 3. *History*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 308–309. Print. 24 vols.

### **Film:**

James G. Thomas, Jr., Keerthi Chandrashekar, Je’Monda Roy, dirs., *Randy Weeks: Mississippi Songwriter*, Official Selection, Oxford Film Festival 2018

### **Photography exhibitions:**

James G. Thomas, Jr., seventeen photographs in *North Mississippi—2017* student exhibition, Gammill Gallery, Barnard Observatory, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, Fall 2017

James G. Thomas, Jr., *Cultural Transcendentalism* (35 photographs) in *PROJECT(ion)*, Oxford, Mississippi, August 11, 2018

## **RECENT PRESENTATIONS AND SERVICE**

Academic Advisor, "Publishing in the 21st Century," SHA Graduate Council, 86th Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association, November 9, 2018

"*Mississippi Encyclopedia*," Mississippi Book Festival, August 19, 2017 (Panelist)

"The Art of Kate Freeman Clark," University of Mississippi Museum, March 30, 2017, (Panel Organizer/Panelist)

"Preserving Our Past: Oral History as a Valuable Tool for Exploring Our Ethnic Roots," Southern Cultural Heritage Center, Vicksburg, Mississippi, February 18, 2017

Co-curator, *Lasting Impressions: Restoring Kate Freeman Clark* (exhibition), University of Mississippi Museum, March 2017

Mississippi Book Festival, "William Faulkner: His Life and Writings." August 20, 2016 (Panel Moderator)

Mississippi Department of Archives and History, History Is Lunch Lecture Series Lecture, Lecture on *Conversations with Barry Hannah*. January 20, 2016

University of Mississippi Museum, Panel moderator. *Kate Freeman Clark: A New Look at a National Treasure*. November 5, 2015

Porter Fortune, Jr. History Symposium on Southern Religion, Panel moderator. "The Future of the Field of Southern Religious History and of the Scholarly Research and Teaching Legacy of Charles Reagan Wilson," February 28, 2015

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Science and Medicine, Music, Ethnicity, Media, and Literature*,” Louisiana Book Festival, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, November 2013  
(Panel Organizer/Panelist)

Filson Institute Public Conference: “Viewing the South from a 21st-Century Perspective: *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*,” Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky, September 21–23, 2013 (Conference Organizer/Panelist)

“What *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* Tells Us about the Burden of the Southern Future,” Panelist. Georgia Center for the Book, Decatur, Georgia, August 20, 2013

“The End of an Era: *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* Project Concludes,” Brown Bag Lecture Series, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, April 24, 2013

“Documentary Filmmaking: *Jesus Is My Rock*,” Panel Moderator, Music of the South Conference, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, April 4, 2013

“Mississippi *Mahjar*: Lebanese Migration to the Mississippi Delta and Its Impact on Race Relations,” Brown Bag Lecture Series, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, February 13, 2013

“What Is Southern Self-taught Art? *Independent Expression: Self-taught Art of the 20th Century*,” Lecture, University of Mississippi Museum, February 6, 2013

Curator, *Independent Expression: Self-taught Art of the 20th Century*, University of Mississippi Museum, January 22–April 6, 2013

“Mississippi *Mahjar*—Lebanese Immigration to the Mississippi Delta,” University of Mississippi Delta Symposium, Oxford, January 31, 2013

Liberal Arts 102 Curriculum Committee, chair (2009–), Center for Writing and Rhetoric,  
University of Mississippi (2009–)

Board Member, University of Mississippi Museum (December 2012–)

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Science and Medicine, Folklife, and Art and  
Architecture*,” Louisiana Book Festival, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, November 2012 (Panel  
Organizer/Panelist)

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Foodways, Social Class, Gender, and Science  
and Medicine*,” Decatur Book Festival, Decatur, Georgia, October 2012 (Panel  
Organizer/Panelist)

“Center for the Study of Southern Culture Publications,” Panelist, Music of the South  
Symposium, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, March  
2012

*Mississippi Arts Hour* Radio Show, March 6, 2011 (Interview)

*On the Fringes of Delta Life: Communities and Adjustments in the Lower Mississippi Valley*,  
“Mississippi *Mahjar*: Lebanese Migration to the Mississippi Delta and Its Impact on Race  
Relations,” 2010 Southern Historical Association annual meeting, Charlotte, North  
Carolina, November 2010

“Creolized Mississippi Culture,” 2010 Delta Divertissement, Southern Foodways Alliance,  
Greenwood, Mississippi, October 2010

“Editing New Academic Texts on the South: *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* and  
*Global South*,” with Adetayo Alabi, Associate Professor of English and Editor of *Global  
South*, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, September  
2010

“Getting Published: How and Where to Publish Academic Writing,” Department of History,  
University of Mississippi, April 2010

Co-Director, Mississippi, Southern Literary Trail, [www.southernliterarytrail.org](http://www.southernliterarytrail.org), February  
2010– (Three-year term)

“Mississippi *Mahjar*: The Lebanese Migration Experience in the Mississippi Delta,” Ohio  
Mississippi Valley Heritage Conference, March 2010

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: Agriculture, Industry, Gender, and Music,” The  
Louisiana Book Festival, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, October 2009 (Panel Organizer)

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: Law and Politics, Foodways, and Literature,” The  
Louisiana Book Festival, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, October 2008 (Panel Organizer)

“Kibbe at the Crossroads,” National Public Radio, *Hidden Kitchens*, January 31, 2008

“The Future of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture,” Center for the Study of Southern  
Culture, University of Mississippi, November 2007

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: Foodways,” Southern Festival of Books,  
Nashville, Tennessee, October 2007 (Panel Organizer)

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* and Southern Language,” Southeast Conference  
on Linguistics, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, April 2007

“*The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: Why? And Why Now?” Center for the Study of  
Southern Culture, October 2006

Oxford Film Festival, Co-Director (2005), Feature Films Committee Chairman (2005),  
Screening Committee (2003–2011), and Tabloid Editor (2005)

## **BOARDS, MEMBERSHIPS, ADVISING, and CONSULTING**

Academic Consultant to Black Leaf Films LLC (2019–)

University Press of Mississippi, Board of Directors (2015–)

*Southern Quarterly*, Editorial Board (2011–)

Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, Board of Governors (2011–; Vice President, 2018–19; President, 2019–20)

Mississippi Civil Rights Education Commission, Appointed Member (2013)

Friends of the University of Mississippi Museum and Historic Houses, Board Member (2012–15), Vice-President (2014–15)

Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area Partnership Resource Stewardship and Enhancement Committee Member (2012–14)

Mississippi Historical Society, Member (2004–)

Southern Literary Trail, Board of Governors / Mississippi Co-Director (2008–13; *ex officio* and Academic Advisor, 2013–)

Southern Historical Association, Member (2004–)

Yoknapatawpha Arts Council, Member (2005–11)

## **AWARDS and FELLOWSHIPS**

William Winter Fellow, Natchez Cinema and Literary Celebration (2020)

Mississippi Heritage Trust, Heritage Award, for *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* (2018)



Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, Special Achievement Award, for *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* (2018)

Mississippi Historical Society, Award of Merit, for *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* (2018)

Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, Special Achievement Award, for *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2014)